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NOVEMBER

BEWARE THE RIO GUN-GHOST!
by JOHN H. LATHAM

BLACK GOLD FOR COWMEN'S BLOOD!
by C. WILLIAM HARRISON

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Vol. 8 NOVEMBER, 1944 No. 3

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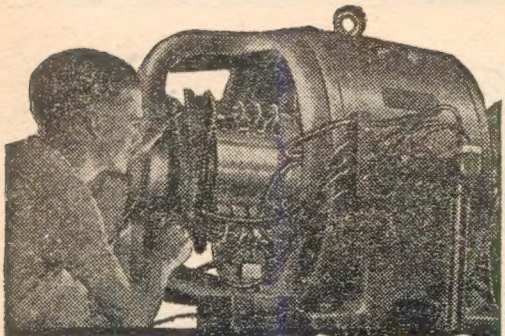

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The Strawboss

THE two men stood in the driving rain, a little apart from the wet, moonlit group that was loading the bodies of old Hank Adams and his wife onto a buckboard, looking at the sodden ashes of Hank's ranch house. After a while one said, deep in his throat, "Gaynor'll pay for this."

The other man didn't answer for a moment. Then he said, "Hank's dead, Charley."

Charley looked at him sharply, his lined old hawk-face upturned in the dim light. "Sure, he's dead. But he ain't forgotten. He's still got friends to fight for him, ain't he?"

The other shifted big shoulders under his slicker. "He's got friends, and I'm one of them. We'll fight, all right. But this is no time to forget that Hank died because he made a bad mistake—this least of all. It wasn't the kind of mistake we can afford to forget."

Charley said slowly, "I ain't sure I like what you're sayin', John."

"I don't like it myself, but it's got to be said." John looked squarely at the oldster, his big, craggy face twisted in a wry little smile.

"Listen, old-timer. Hank Adams was as square as they come—salt of the earth, give you the shirt off his back. Back in '48, when Tim Bradleigh tried to take over this range, just like Gaynor's doin' now, Hank was one of the first to pick up a gun. He got burnt off then, too, but he lived through it and went on fightin'.

"We banded together—Hank, Ed and Bill Goodenough, Jim Thompson, Carl

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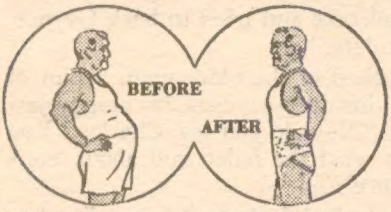

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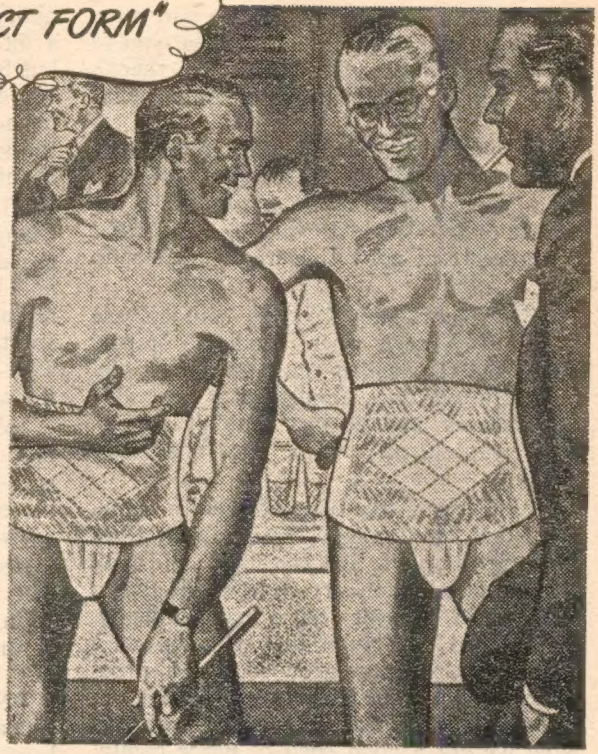

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White and me. That was before you come to the Basin, Charley. I reckon you've heard about that fight, but mebbe there's some things you've forgot or didn't hear right.

"I guess you know about Bradleigh—he come in from Wyoming, bought a spread, then started bringin' in a gun-crew. A couple of us wanted to call his hand right then, before he got so big we couldn't whip him.

"But Hank and the rest couldn't see it that way, even when Bradleigh started buyin' out the smaller ranchers and drivin' off a few nesters. Hank was a peaceable man himself, and he just couldn't see another man startin' trouble until it actually hit him.

"Well, when the blow-off finally come, like I said, Hank fought like a wildcat. Shot Bradleigh himself, that last night, and took plenty of lead doin' it. Afterwards, when he got well, I never seen a man so happy. He said to me, 'John boy, you an' me's gonna see this range grow so big an' prosperous it won't be able to git its hat on. We've had our war, an' we've won 'er. Now we got a good spell of peace comin' to us, an' we'll build up the Basin to where won't nobody ever dare tackle us agin!'

"I thought to myself that was a pretty rosy way of lookin' at things, but I didn't have the heart to say nothin' to discourage him. Well, you know what happened. We had five whoppin' good years. Hank got himself a wife, rebuilt his barn an' corrals, an' started puttin' money away in the bank. Then Gaynor bought into the Basin when Jim Thompson died. Gaynor is Jim's cousin, you know, looks a lot like him, an' nobody figured he'd turn out to be a sidewinder.

"After that, it was the same story all over agin, only worse. Hank had got this idea in his head that all his fightin' was over, that the Basin had already had its range-hog war, an' that was that. Carl an' me seen it comin' an' we tried to argue with him, but it was no use. Sure, Gaynor had a lot of gun-handy men workin' for him, but he needed 'em down near the badlands like he was. We reminded him that Jim never had no army like that when he had the same land, but Hank just said, 'Times change, boys.'

"That was the trouble — they had changed. They'd gone around in a kind of circle, right back to where we started from, and Hank couldn't see that. He had a lot of influence, too, people in the Basin respected his opinion. . . . When he finally seen his mistake and tried to buck Gaynor, it was too late."

John looked at the older man, a hint of sadness in his deep-set eyes, his craggy jaw rock-firm. "Now do you see, Charley? You remember what the feller said about 'eternal vigilance'?"

Charley looked down embarrassedly, then met the other man's gaze. "I remember, John," he said. "I won't forget, neither. It ain't too late for us to remember that, is it?"

"No," said John. "We've had some close squeaks, but in America at least it's never been all the way too late yet. God willing, it never will be."

Those words, "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty," are as true today as they were when John Curran wrote them. The Basin ranchers' fight, costly as it was in sweat and blood, was only a small part of a battle that began before Caesar—the battle of free men against the forces that would take away their freedom. Seventeen seventy-six was part of it, and 1914—and it has not ended with 1944. The war for freedom against the slavery of fascism will not end with Hitler & Co., or even with Franco or Argentina's dictator Perón. We cannot foresee the end of it. But if enough of us only remember that tyranny is a many-headed monster, that end will surely come —and it will not be a victory for fascism.

—The Editor.

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Hard-Hitting Border Novel

BEWARE THE RIO GUN-GHOST!

A midnight bushwhack fiesta condemned Dain Raidlow to the life of an outcast from his dad's Rambling R. . . . Until, as the Peccary Kid, stark rider of the shadows, he proved that a Raidlow—even a dead one—might still carry on the fight for free men's rights!

By JOHN H. LATHAM

CHAPTER ONE

The Yellow Brand

A RAG of wind rattled the live-oak leaves, showering rain down on the hats and shoulders of the Rambling R round-up crew, bunched in the shelter of the motte. Old Rye Raidlow scanned the dripping, thorny *mesquitals* and amagorsa thickets with moody eyes as he gave the day's orders.

In the gray half-light of an early morning he looked tall and gaunt in the saddle, impervious to the slow, spitting rain and the cold wind that needled a man to the bone.

Young Dain Raidlow squatted on his hunkers by a slow-burning fire, soaked and shivering like a half-drowned dog. He'd spent most of the night riding herd on a bunch of half-wild brush-poppers made spooky by chain lightning. His eyes were bloodshot, and his clothing wet and stiff and cold to the touch. The storm, a regular gully-washer and fence-lifter, had scattered part of the herd, and Dain knew his father blamed him for that.

In Old Rye's opinion, his son was a little bit of nothing whittled down to a fine point.

"Frenchy," he said, "you take Josh and Whitey and work that pear flat this side of Crippled Deer Creek. I'll take the rest of the boys and—"

The sentence ended on a grunt. There had been the flat, meaty thud of a bullet striking flesh. Old Rye trembled as if the

The bald killer was going to shoot El Cabrón!

cold had finally penetrated his marrows. He was slumping from the saddle when the brittle crack of a high-powered rifle came drifting down the brushy aisles.

The round-up crew seemed frozen during the interval the rancher fought to keep his balance. The unexpectedness of the attack left them stunned. Old Rye lost his grip on a latigo string and fell heavily, and the startled bronc shied off crabwise, with empty stirrups flapping. All hands stared at the blue-rimmed hole centering the back of the rancher's brush jacket

Rye Raidlow was a hard, stubborn man. On the threshold of death he managed enough strength to shove erect and stand on widespread, saddle-warped legs, glaring out of a mask of pain and mud at his round-up crew.

"Git that damn bushwhacking *cabrón!*" he croaked. "Run the damn' varmint into the ground!"

The words galvanized the outfit into action. "The shot must have come from that hogback behind the camp," Gus Emory snapped. The big *caporal's* face was so drained of color that the freckles stood out like black islands across his caved-in nose. "Scatter and beat the brush! Rye, you—"

"Andale!" The old rancher's voice was weaker. "Git the hell out of here!"

Raidlow half-turned to his son, swaying like a man in the last stages of intoxication. Dain's every instinct told him to rush to his father's side. But there was no compromise in Old Rye's eyes. He was implacable, his angry glare like the cut of a whiplash, and a lifetime of misunderstanding made a barrier that Dain could not break down. He whirled to the saddle.

Old Rye crumpled and fell as his son raked his mount with spurs and sent it at a buck-jumping run through the motte.

Breaking from the live-oaks into a wide *granjeno* that rolled back the brush, Dain had one sharp glimpse of a plume of black powdersmoke lifting from a clump of live-oaks off to the left. It dissolved and was gone in an instant, but he whirled that way. He had a clear picture in his mind of Old Rye turning to Gus Emory as he gave the day's orders. And he shivered at recollection of the ugly, solid thump of the slug as it ripped into his father's back.

The shot had come from this live-oak motte, he felt certain.

Dain yanked out his saddle gun and levered a shell into the firing chamber. He could hear the fading sounds of popping brush and pounding hoofs as the round-up crew raced off in the opposite direction. He plunged into the first matted tangle of mesquite and scrub shinery, with thorns raking his face and hands and the dripping thickets showering him with water.

Dain's heart was hammering in his chest as he neared the live-oak motte. He drew rein, once, and heard a limb crack and the thud of out-riding hoofs. He spurred ahead, and had a glimpse of a dented hat and a tawny flash of color that marked a racing horse. But there was no chance for a shot. Man and mount were swallowed by the brush before he could jerk the Winchester to his shoulder.

Sign was plentiful in the motte. Droppings and a hoof-cut patch of muddy earth indicated that a horse had been tethered there for several hours. A dangling limb, fresh-broken, showed Dain how the killer had climbed high enough to shoot down into the camp, and the puncher picked up a shiny Spencer .56-46 coppercase under the tree. Stuffing the empty hull in his chaps, Dain spurred after the bushwhacker.

THE trail was easy to follow. The deep, sliding prints made by quick-striking hoofs zigzagged through the brush for perhaps a quarter of a mile, then swung west in a wide circle toward Crippled Deer Creek. Dain heard a ripping splash as his quarry struck the ford on the run. He broke from the brush just as a slim rider on a long-legged *bayo coyote* plunged up the opposite bank and disappeared into the huisache thickets that bordered the muddy, rain-swollen stream. Jerking up his saddle gun, the puncher laid three shots in the screening tangle as fast as he could lever and pull the trigger.

A shrill, pain-strident scream lifted from the undergrowth, and Dain knew savage elation. That elation turned to cold fear as a gun cracked and a slug slammed into his leg with the force of a mule-kick, knocking him half out of the saddle. He was out in the open, a sitting-duck target for the wounded killer across the creek, and lead plucked at his brush-jacket and was whining close as he turned tail and bolted for the nearest cover.

Dain's heart was thudding against his ribs. Slimy, paralyzing fear crawled in his belly. He used spurs and quirted reinends to put distance between himself and the killer holed up in the huisaches. He was a long way from the creek when he finally pulled in, sick inside and nerves raw.

He'd swapped shots with an ambush killer and wounded the man, and been shot himself for the first time in his life. . . .

Rain moved in serried ranks down the brushy slopes of nearby Loma Alta and was lashed through the thickets in gusty torrents by a fitful wind as Dain rode back to camp. He'd tied a dirty shirt-tail bandage around his leg and stopped the bleeding. His ragged, grease- and mud-stained chaps hid evidence of the wound. But his face was the color of old ashes, and his stomach was knotted and quivering the way it always was when something boogered him.

Old Rye was still clinging to a slender thread of life. He'd been placed on a pile of dirty quilts in the bed-wagon. Gus Emory was hitching the cook's team to the short-coupled wagon. The rest of the men leaned against the sideboards or hunkered under the tarp shelter, cold and disgruntled

and ill at ease in the presence of approaching death. The broncs had turned tail to the driving rain and were humped and shivering under wet saddles.

Dain swung down and limped to the back of the wagon. His spurs clinked loud in the silence that marked his entry into the camp. He leaned against the end-gate, slim, small-boned, a mere shadow beside the giant physique of his hard-bitten father. He had straight black hair and muddy brown eyes that looked miserable most of the time. He failed utterly to measure up to old Rye's swashbuckling standard, and he'd borne the bitter humiliation of it all his life. Old Rye had nothing but contempt for his half-size son.

The iron-willed rancher dominated this scene as he had everything in his life. The bullet had sliced across his back and lodged near his spine, and Dain knew the pain must be excruciating. But old Rye, bloody as a stuck hog, was toughing it out without a grunt.

Sweat ran in rivulets from his gray hair. Blood seeped from the corners of his trap-tight mouth, staining his close-clipped gray beard, but there was still fire in the piercing pale-gray eyes and power in the rumbling, whisky-harsh voice.

"I've got some things to say," he growled.

OLD RYE'S speech was brief. For thirty years he'd ruled this Bienvenida range with his rock-hard fists and his hickory-handled sixguns and his unbridled gall. He'd taken it as rough as life could dish it out—and handed it back with interest. He'd always bragged that he would fight the devil out of hell from taw to breakfast and give him back a plugged peso's change.

And it had taken a bushwhacker's bullet, he swore wrathfully, to bring him down off his high horse.

"It's a toss-up as to who had this ambush done," he told them, his voice fading to a shallow whisper. "El Cabrón is camped somewhere across the Nueces in the *brasada*. He's a rustler and a cold-blooded killer, but I never heard of the Border-jumping son shooting a man from cover. That's more Gar Weaver's style. That lousy sheep-syndicate ramrod is too slick to do his own dirty work. Probably put a bounty on my head and let some gutless *pelado* collect it the easy way. Him and El Cabrón might even be in cahoots.

"I've just one regret in life," old Rye finished, and long years of bitterness and smouldering resentment made his weak voice ragged. "I've never backed up an inch from any man. Fought a good fight, and ready to hang up my boots. And I only wish I was leavin' behind a big spur-jingling, hell-raising wolf-whelp to carry on the fight with that damn' Sonora sheep outfit!"

Not once had the old cowman looked at his son, standing at the wagon end-gate. He acted as if Dain Raidlow did not exist. The young puncher crushed his hat in his hands until the knuckles under the brown, thorn-scarred skin showed bone-white. He was aware of grudging sympathy in the looks given him by the round-up crew. It was common knowledge that old Rye had not spoken to his son in over a year. Now it seemed the stubborn old stockman would carry that silence to the grave.

Dain Raidlow had taken old Rye's rough-shod abuse all of his life, but this—this was like kicking a man when he was down. All the pent-up hatred that had been cankering in the boy's heart for years boiled over in helpless rage, and he cried in a hoarse, unnatural voice:

"But I struck that bushwhacker's trail, Dad! Followed it to Crippled Deer Creek, and—"

He broke off, with the cold, sullen hostility of the round-up crew grating against his sharpened senses. That same contempt was mirrored in his father's bleak eyes. And the reason for their unspoken condemnation came to him suddenly.

CONVERGING on the ridge where the killer was thought to have been hiding, the punchers had spotted Dain racing off in the opposite direction. And they'd surmised, along with old Rye, that he'd coyoted and was riding away from danger!

None of them had noticed that Dain was wounded, and limping. The shirt-tail bandage made his thigh look bulky, but the blood had soaked his levis and run down in his boot. A man would have to look mighty close to spot the small round bullet-hole in his mud-and grease-stained *chivarras*. The ragged and patched brush-

torn chaps were already full of holes.

Dain could not hide the sickening shame that tore through him. His face turned a muddy yellowish color and the corners of his mouth jerked down. The scene was like one of those fear-ridden nightmares that he had known all of his life. There was no threat of physical violence here, yet he felt at the mercy of every man present.

"I—I shot that damn' bushwhacker, Dad!" he burst out. "That is, I wounded him. Caught him at the ford on Crippled Deer Creek. He shot back, and—"

"Send Shorty after the sawbones, Gus," old Rye broke in, glumly. "Drive me to the home ranch. . . ."

The cowman's voice trailed off in a choked whisper, and Dain winced as if he'd been slapped in the face. He tried to say something, but the words stuck in his throat. Old Rye thought he was lying—telling it big to curry favor with him and the crew.

Hurt, embittered, the puncher turned and stumbled to his horse. He had but one thought in mind; to hit the trail and keep fogging up dust until he'd put a lot of distance between himself and this hard, unrelenting old man who had always belittled his son. He could never measure up to old Rye's whang-leather pattern. He was a failure in old Rye's eyes, and the devil out of hell couldn't convince the cowman different.

Fighting back hot tears, Dain dragged himself into the saddle and spurred down the muddy slope toward the creek. There was a trail of blood from the wagon to where the horse had been ground-hitched. Blood dripped from his stirrup as he rode away.

Away from the camp, and old Rye's accusing glare, Dain found that he could think more clearly. He pulled the wet, mud-spattered bronc in to a walk and reflected dismally on the turn of events.

The ambush had been the work of some hireling of the Sonora Land and Sheep Company, he felt certain. Gar Weaver was the syndicate ramrod. He had finally broken old Rye Raidlow's power, with a bullet from the brush, and achieved mastery of the Basin.

That thought paralyzed Dain, squeezed his heart dry. Stark in his mind was the realization that he was falling heir to more than just a cattle ranch. For seven years old Rye had stood like a rock against the tide that threatened to engulf the Basin—a tide more ruthless and destructive than water, for it was sheep that Weaver would release to flood the Bienvenida range and crop it tooth-clean and barren.

Weaver was an arrogant, headstrong man who'd come into the Basin with a driving ambition for land and power and prestige. He'd bought controlling interest in the syndicate, for sheep was the answer to his need for quick money. He cared nothing for the havoc they wrought on the range. He'd hired a string of gunfighting Border toughs and driven out more than one small owner, and spread his boundaries until he held all of Bienvenida west of Crippled Deer Creek. Only his fear of old Rye's guns had kept him from crossing that deadline to better grass on the slopes of Loma Alta.

NOW Rye Raidlow was dying, with a bushwhacker's bullet in his back. And his son was left with a bloody sheep-and-cattle war on his hands if he meant to claim his inheritance. . . .

Old Rye had been a famous frontier marshal and all-around guncat. Any one of the Rambling R outfit would have followed him to hell and gone. But that same crew would balk at serving under Rye's son. Realization of that fact gave Dain a sick, helpless feeling. He couldn't have felt more alone if he'd been in the middle of the Llano Estacado desert.

That's when the young puncher decided to go on over the hill for keeps. He knew he didn't have the guts to face the music. Old Rye had told him that so often that he no longer questioned it. A man couldn't buck his fate, Dain told himself glumly.

Cold, clammy dread was crawling in the puncher's belly now at the thought of facing Gar Weaver and his gunhands. His was an inborn fear of physical violence, and he knew his life wouldn't be worth a hoot in hell if the syndicate crew caught him in the Basin. Old Dad Thorp, in Mesa Verde, was an honest lawman. But Weaver would cover his tracks well.

He'd probably lay the blame for the ambush killing on El Cabrón, the Border-jumping renegade camped across the Nueces in the *brasada.*

All of Dain's bitterness and resentment vanished. This was grim reality, and he swallowed the raw grief that hurt his throat. With Weaver pulling legal strings, and with a bunch of bounty-hunting toughs on his trail, the puncher figured his only hope for safety lay in making a fast ride across the Nueces into the trackless brush country.

But it made a puckery pill for him to swallow. Dain had old Rye's pride, if not his raw courage, and running away made him sick to the soul. Bitter, heartbroken, he slumped in the saddle and cussed himself for a gutless wonder. And all the time he was riding hard for the river, coyoting.

This was Dain Raidlow in stark, damning reality. Dain Raidlow, earmarked and branded a coward by his dying father!

CHAPTER TWO

Meet—the Peccary Kid!

HUNGER and the feverish throbbing of the wound in his leg finally drove Dain out of hiding and down to a camp he'd found in a brush-choked arroyo. The bandage had worked loose and his denim trousers were soaked with blood. The slug made a bluish, misshapen lump at the back of his thigh. He'd fainted while trying to gouge out the bullet with the dull, rusty blade of a pocketknife, and left a ragged slash in his leg muscles. He was sick and scared and lonely, and at times half delirious.

The camp looked big. Wet rat-tail cactus reflected the light of leaping brush fires like shiny blue steel. *Mesquitals* and scrub oak thickets were soggy and dripping water, and Dain was soaked and shivering in the saddle like a wet pup. He knew this was an outlaw layout.

Fourteen men were gathered around the fires, dealing blackjack and stud on spread tarp-covered soogans muddy with bootprints. Dain saw big steeple-crowned sombreros shading coffee-brown faces, and the glint of crossed bandoleers over ragged charro jackets. The dented hats of gringo outlaws were numerous among the poker players.

A chill north wind was sweeping the matorral, but the Border-jumpers were

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sweating from the heat of roaring brush fires and the rotgut Mexican whisky that warmed their bellies. An old Saltillo trader had brought in a load of tequila and pulque, burro-packed across the Ladrone Mountains, and the renegades were passing around squat, straw-woven jugs.

The wounded puncher had been casing the outlaw *corrida* for the better part of an hour, hunkered down behind a clump of chapote on the hogback ridge above the arroyo. He had seen two fist-fights and a knife melee among the Mexicans, and knew this was as vicious and short-tempered an outfit as a man could find in the *brasada*.

But anything, he told himself wretchedly, was better than holing up in a thicket and dying like some wounded animal. Dain dragged himself into the saddle and rode down the hill to the camp.

The outlaws were trouble-wise and wary. At the first soggy sound of approaching hoofbeats, several of the men laid down their cards and melted into the darkness. Dain caught the glint of drawn guns. He rode into the outer fringe of light, with the shadows limning the long-legged roan and its slender rider, and stared around the circle of hard, tense faces.

"Where'n blazes did you come from, kid?" a big gringo demanded, stepping forward. "This ain't no crossroads dance. Just h'ist your tail around and ride back where you come from!"

THE speaker was tall, broad-shouldered and in his middle twenties, with a rock-hard, reckless face covered with dirt and a sweat-grimed growth of black whiskers that hadn't seen a razor in a week. His eyes were pale-blue, and as hard and cold as burnished steel. He wore a double-breasted red flannel shirt under a new calfskin jacket, and a brown Double-X beaver slanted askew over a dirty bandage around his head. The butts of two bone-handled six-shooters, so covered with notches that Dain couldn't count them, protruded above the fringe of his bull-hide chaps on each thigh.

The puncher managed a sickly grin. "I—I just happened to see your fire," he said. "A damn' javelina hog caught me off my horse and run a tusk in my leg. I'd shore be obliged if you'd let me wash dishes for a bait of grub. I can be right handy around a cow camp, mister."

The big, black-whiskered Border-jumper shook his head. There was an ugly glint in his almost colorless eyes. "Skeedaddle," he growled, and his hand was on his gun. "We ain't givin' no handouts to grub-line riders."

"Climb down, kid—" this from a slim, middle-aged man sitting cross-legged on a blanket near one of the fires—"and soak up some heat. Pelon, here, is just joking. There's the grub-box. And black coffee with the whiskers are b'iling on the coals. Git a bait of *frijoles* and biscuits under your belt. Then we'll have a look-see at that rip in your leg. A dad-blamed peccary boar can gore a man almighty bad when it catches him on foot."

The outlaw's voice had never lifted above a lazy Texas drawl, but it carried plenty of authority. He looked small, even shrunken, in a big flat-crowned black sombrero and a black claw-hammer coat as dirty and ragged as the old brush-scarred chaps buckled around his hips. The coat bulged over the butt of a low-slung six-shooter.

His lean face, old and lined beyond his years, was gashed with the knife- and bullet-scars of a wild life. His dark gaze studied the puncher's double-rigged kak with its rope-marked saddle horn and the breast strap for roping in the brush. He completely ignored the man he'd called Pelon.

And the puncher got the idea that this mild, quiet little man was just as hard a case, if not harder, than the big spur-jingling Pelon, who notched "credits" on his guns and bragged, according to cow-country legend, that he'd killed twenty men, not counting the Mexicans and Indians. Somehow Dain knew this must be El Cabrón, The He-Goat, who rustled cattle out of the brush on both sides of the Border.

"I—I got the bleeding stopped," Dain said hastily, swinging down and limping to the fire. "I'd just be obliged for some grub, mister. And a chance to thaw the chill out of my bones. Reckon it's colder'n a blue norther out in that wet brush!"

There was no telling what the outlaws would do, the puncher reflected glumly, if they found out he'd lied about his wound. If the outfit was in Weaver's pay, they might

take him for a spy. And Dain had heard some ugly, sinister tales concerning the way renegade bunches handled traitors and spies.

Old Rye had told him more than once about the dread Yaqui Ride. He shivered at the thought of being roped naked on a wild bull and hazed through a wall of cactus higher than a horseman's hat.

The little outlaw grinned at Dain. He handed the puncher a half-empty tequila bottle.

"This will take the chill out of your guts, button!"

DAIN accepted the proffered bottle. He was conscious of Pelon's smoldering stare as he raised it to his lips. Pelon, he knew, was the Mexican word for hairless, bald. And this black-whiskered young dude outlaw, with a shiny dome as smooth as a white billiard cue, ranked with King Fisher and Bill Kingsley as a killer.

He had made his reputation in the Salt Lick war, where he was supposed to have ambushed the man that hired him and ridden off with money taken from the dead man's pockets. He was mean and ornery —itching, according to the cow-camp talk Dain had heard, to put more notches in his guns. His pale-blue eyes were faintly contemptuous as he shifted his gaze from Dain to the outlaw *jefe*.

"Ain't no use clutterin' up the camp with things like this," he growled, "that I'll maybe have to gut-shoot or knock in the head. King Fisher never run an outfit like this."

"This ain't King Fisher's outfit," El Cabrón reminded him, in that same lazy drawl. "You try to ramrod my *corrida*, Pelon, an' I'll make a bunch-quitter out of you shore. Saw off your long horns. We don't file notches for bushwhack murders down here in the *brasada!*"

That part of the bald-headed gunman's face that showed above the sweat-grimed whiskers turned as gray as an old blanket. His slitted eyes were as colorless as bottle glass, and reminded Dain of the eyes of a coiled rock rattler.

His hands dropped to the bone-handled guns at his hips. He held that menacing pose for long, nerve-wracking seconds, then spun on a muddy boot-heel that was too high and narrow for a working cowhand.

"I'll remember that," he muttered, thickly. "When the sign is right!"

El Cabrón had sat with his slim hands folded in his lap, a smile frozen on his lean face. He stared after the angry Pelon, some inner thought bringing a touch of cynical humor to his dark eyes. He turned to Dain.

"Uncork that bottle, button," he grinned, "and let me wash the scum out of my mouth. Pelon likes to jangle his spurs. Ride 'er high, wide and handsome. But he was wished on me. He ain't runnin' my outfit. And by Gawd I'll—"

HE BROKE off suddenly. Out in the night a brush owl's throaty drum was echoed by the mournful yip-yapping of a prowling coyote. Both sounds were alien to this dismal, rain-swept night, and the men moved back from the fire. Guns glinted.

Dain heard the thud of trotting hoofs near at hand. Then two riders emerged as detached shadows from the outer darkness and moved into the circle of firelight. The puncher sat frozen, his belly twisting into a cold knot of fear as he recognized two of Gar Weaver's gunhands.

"Light and rest your saddle," El Cabrón called, rising. "And I hope you fetched a town bottle. I'd as soon drink hawg-waller as this damn tequila."

Short, dark, hawk-eyed Sam Ney swung down and approached the fire, his stride short and choppy with saddle-cramp. His yellow slicker, drawn back over the butts of two low-slung Navy .45's, gave off a wet reflection, and water dripped from his roll-brimmed hat. He spread his hands to the blaze.

"Weaver buys rotgut Mexican whisky by the barrel," he said. "We get a slug with every meal. Two-bits a shot, with that bull-necked cook dolin' it out with his grub."

"Weaver's makin' money hand over fist," El Cabrón commented. "But he smells of sheep and his coin stinks of the same. What's he hatched out of that sheepman's brain of his, Sam? Howcome he had us ride up from the Border?"

"Ten thousand reasons howcome," Ney answered with a thin grin. "Tonto, fetch that morral!"

Dain knew burly, thick-built Tonto

Slater as the blackleg son of a squawman living up on the Middle Concho. Slater had the massive brows and flat knuckles of a broken-down prizefighter. He'd run with the coyote packs, not having the guts to trail with the real wild bunch, and he was as dangerous as a rattlesnake with a broken back. He pitched a rawhide-tied morral at El Cabrón's feet.

"Ten thousand in new currency," Ney said flatly, "just to rustle the Rambling R herd across the Line into Old Mexico. Or scatter it through the *brasada*. Old Rye Raidlow won't give you any trouble. He's dead, and his coyote whelp is headed yonderly—fast! The herd is gathered on Crippled Deer Creek, about four miles from the river. It'll be the easiest wad of dinero that you gents ever made!"

"So old Rye's dead," El Cabrón mused, "and his whelp was plain coyote. I can't figure that ol' guncat's kin not having all the guts in the world!"

"Plain yellow," Ney answered emphatically. "Took it on the run like a well-whipped, tail-tucked cur-dog! Not enough backbone to hang and rattle. Too short on nerve to—"

Ney broke off as if he'd been jabbed with a sharp-pointed puñal. His chill gaze had swept past the jefe to the wounded puncher hunkered on a blanket, and something like fear stirred in the depths of his dark eyes. Then rage, white-hot and wicked, had its way with the man. His voice rasped strident as a file on a rusty saw.

"What the hell is *he* doing here?"

THIS was it, Dain told himself. The puncher had heard enough to know that in this outlaw camp he'd last about as long as a snowball in hell, if Sam Ney revealed his identity. He could expect no mercy from these men.

"The kid?" El Cabrón laughed. "Dadblamed young fool let a pig catch him on foot and gore hell out of him, Sam. He's wounded and hungry. I never turn a hungry man away from my camp. Just superstition, I reckon. But I'll hold the button until we've made our haul, then turn him loose. Nothing for you to worry about."

"Nothing for me to worry about?" Ney's voice cracked like a whiplash. "Do you know who that damn kid *is?*"

The wounded puncher's lean face had turned a sickly yellowish color and his heart was pounding in his ears like a hammer on an anvil. Dain felt numb all over, paralyzed with fear. But none of that showed in his actions.

He snarled like a crippled coyote that's been cornered by the hound pack. He still had the half-empty bottle gripped by its long neck in his right hand.

As Ney opened his mouth to answer his own damning question, Dain lunged up and swung the bottle in a vicious blow that landed with a meaty thud on the man's jaw. There was the cracking crunch of broken glass and bashed flesh, and Ney dropped like a steer that's been hit between the horns with the back of a single-bladed axe.

Dain had the broken bottle-neck in his hand. He knew if he pulled a gun he'd be inviting a hail of bullets in the back. He whipped the ugly weapon down as Tonto Slater made his draw, and the hand that the burly gunman jerked back was bloody and mangled.

Shattered glass shards were all that Dain had left. His own hand was cut and bleeding. He dropped the bottle-neck and swung a savage kick at Slater, but his wounded leg would not support his weight. He staggered and fell near the fire. And the burly Slater, veteran of a lifetime of barroom brawling and bare-knuckle prizefighting, leaped on the prostrate puncher.

A down-driven shoulder crushed the air out of Dain's lungs. Thick, bloody fingers knotted in his hair and a rock-hard fist hit him full in the face. His nose cracked. Sharp pain needled his eyes and he had a taste of blood and mud in his mouth. He wrenched his head aside and the next swing scraped along his jaw. But there was enough force behind the blow to start his head spinning like a crazy windmill wheel.

Sheer desperation gave Dain strength to pull Slater's head down and stop those battering blows that were making a bloody pulp of his face. But the wounded puncher was no match for Slater's bull strength. A knee smashed into his belly. A gnarled thumb gouged for his eye. Then Dain had his good leg hooked over Slater's back and was spurring viciously.

Slater screamed in agony as the knife-edged Chihuahua rowel slashed down his back, ripping his slicker and denim brush jumper to shreds and plowing deep furrows

in the flesh along his spine. The cruel blows paralyzed the big man momentarily, relaxing his grip, and Dain shoved him up and put everything he had in a swing to Slater's sagging jaw.

There was a sound like the crack of a bullwhip on a bale of green hides, and Slater's glassy eyes rolled up in his head until only the blood-flecked whites were visible. Dain kicked the limp gunman aside. He crawled to his feet and started backing away, hunting a place to get his shoulders to the wall and room enough to fight.

But the short, bloody battle was over. Slater and Sam Ney were out cold as a Texas norther, and the dark little outlaw *jefe* was grinning widely.

"Tuck in your shirt-tail, button," he commanded. "Gawdamighty! The devil hisself couldn't have done that much damage with a broken bottle!"

PELON stood beside the *jefe*, thumbs hooked in the broad belt of his bullhide chaps. The bald-headed killer's whisky-harsh voice was charged with suspicion.

"Who the hell are you, kid? Who sold you chips in this game? I'd bet my boots again' a rusty lard bucket you got a damn' law-badge pinned to your undershirt!"

That same suspicion was reflected in the eyes of the other outlaws crowding around Dain, but El Cabrón shook his head at the puncher almost imperceptibly.

"The kid ripped Weaver's prize pair up worse'n that peccary pig did him," he told the black-whiskered Pelon. "Sawed their long horns off. That's good enough for my book. But we got to call the tough little son-of-a-buck something. I'm brandin' him the Peccary Kid, and drinking to the toughest little half-pint hellion between Saltillo an' Santone!"

"But if he's a sneakin' badge-toter," Pelon protested, "we—"

"You foundered a good saddle hoss makin' tracks for this layout, Baldy," El Cabrón interrupted, scornfully. "Had a bullet rip in your hairless scalp and been jittery as a gambler at a gospel meetin' ever since. Beat this Peccary Kid in by maybe two hours. Like as not the law was hot on your trail. But who ever heard of a bald-faced button packing a law badge? Or tackling El Cabrón's outfit single-handed? Use the hoss-sense God give you. Simmer down and help the men load that wool-smellin' sheep bait on them broncs and head 'em for home. Rope 'em to the saddle. I don't want the *pelados* stinkin' up my camp. We got the money, and them two ain't no further use to us."

"That's white of you," the wounded puncher managed, though somewhat thickly. "I—"

The darkness crowded in. Dain Raidlow knew that he was falling, but he never hit the ground. Strong hands grabbed him and he was carried to a blanket near one of the brush fires. The heat, seeping into his wet, cold body, partially revived him. He was aware of voices, coming from a great distance, and of blurred faces that seemed to be staring at him down the dark core of a well.

Then sharp pain knifed at his wounded leg and excruciating agony blotted out all sense of time and space and feeling.

CHAPTER THREE

Arroyo Seco Ambush

THERE was the strong tang of frying bacon in the air. Coffee simmered audibly on raked-down coals. Dain thought for a moment he was back in the Rambling R round-up camp. A saddle blanket had been spread over him and he lay there with the smell of horses thick in his nostrils, half-expecting old Rye or Gus Emory to bring the crew out of bed with a rousing yell.

But when the puncher opened his eyes he saw El Cabrón squatting by the fire, washing fresh blood from his hands in a Dutch oven full of hot water. The outlaw had a flour-sack apron tied around his lean hips, and it was as bloody as if he'd been slaughtering a beef. A catgut string, crimson with blood, dangled from his shoulder, and a long needle that had been heated and bent shone in the light of the brush fire.

Realization that the outlaw had been sewing on his leg made Dain grunt like he'd been kicked hard in the belly. The tèquila had made him sick and put a corral taste in his mouth, the way it always did, and he felt like retching. But most of the pain was gone from his wound and

the dry heat of the fever no longer burned his body. The outlaw had probably saved his life, he knew.

The puncher sat up, gripping his head in both hands and fighting down the nausea that crowded up in his throat. El Cabrón handed him a cup of steaming hot coffee. He waved aside a plate of grub.

"You slept peaceful as a *niño* while I was takin' stitches in your leg," the outlaw chuckled. "That damn' peccary broke off a piece of tusk in the wound. Had to cut it out. How'd you like that hunk of bone for a keepsake?"

He dropped a squashed leaden slug in Dain's hand. The puncher had the trapped, helpless feeling of a shirt-tail kid that's been caught stealing melons and trying to lie out of it. But El Cabrón was treating the whole thing like a huge joke—making cracks to the grinning Mexican cook about a button dumb enough to let a javelina boar catch him out of the saddle.

A cowhand that dumb, he told the Mexican, was just bronc-headed enough to try chinking the cracks in a barbwire fence.

"A dad-blamed unweaned yearling—" this from an old Texan with sweeping cowhorn mustaches who was rubbing sleep from his eyes—"has no business away from its mammy after dark. Hell, you can't ever tell when a peccary or a jack-rabbit on the mad is apt to tree one!"

"Es good theeng you no herd the sheeps," the cook laughed. "Thees little hellion he no take that sass off the sheepherders."

"I may be little," Dain retorted, with a twisted grin, "but I'll sure as hell betcha I can outrun my weight in wildcats!"

The old Texan grinned back and said, "Hang an' rattle, Peccary Kid. The boys was just having their fun. You're plenty big to ride the river with, son."

THE little puncher knew a sudden choking joy. The outlaws were ribbing him unmercifully, but it was the kind of spur-jingling josh that lets a man know he's one of the bunch. His pretense that his wound had been inflicted by a wild hog had caught their fancy, Dain realized. They were laughing *with* him. And to the lonesome puncher, starved for the kind of life he'd been denied at the Rambling R, that made all the difference in the world.

It was still hard for him to grasp the fact that he'd been accepted by this Border-jumping wild bunch. But the old Texan was still joshing him—telling him not to get Stetson fever just because he was the saltiest little half-pint son between Saltillo and Santone. Hell, he said, was full of salty young un's that'd bit off more than they could chew.

The old-time outlaw was giving the puncher some good advice. He didn't call any names but Dain got the notion the oldster was warning him to stay out of Pelon's way, or he might wind up just another notch on the bald-headed killer's gun.

A warm wind was blowing up from the south, stripping away the gray clouds that shrouded the heavens and dissolving the fingers of mist that clung to muddy barrancas. Daylight came quickly. A pock-marked Mexican wrangler rustled the remuda into a rope corral that had been stretched on high, drier ground. And the outlaws, laughing and joking like a bunch of brush-popper hands starting a cow-hunt, hurried through breakfast and roped out the horses they would ride that day.

El Cabrón told Dain he was moving the outfit up to the Nueces for the raid on the Rambling R.

"String along, son," he told the puncher. "You might spot that peccary agin—over the sights of a six-shooter! That kind of animal is bad about bushin' up. Flush 'im out in the open and you got your scrap half won."

Pelon was squatting across the fire, sopping bacon-grease out of his tin plate with a sourdough biscuit and listening to the *jefe* give the punchers orders. The bald-headed killer had slept out in the brush that night, away from the camp. He'd shaved and put on a clean double-breasted red flannel shirt, and polished his boots and buckled on a pair of silver-mounted spurs. He had the appearance of a handsome, reckless range dude with the sweat-grimed black whiskers scraped from his lean brown face and a red silk handkerchief knotted around his neck. But the chill, merciless, pale-blue eyes belied that impression. They held the predatory gleam of a wolf's as he gave the puncher a thin-lipped grin.

"Gent baiting a trap," he said flatly, "had better be damn' sure his own bushy tail don't get caught in it."

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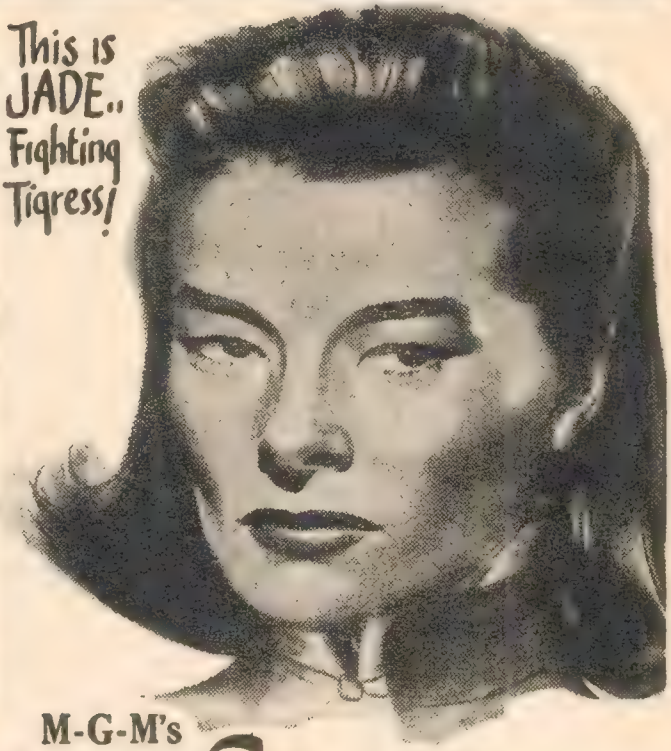

M-G-M's

DRAGON SEED

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M-G-M's
TWENTY YEARS OF SCREEN LEADERSHIP

That clammy dread was crawling inside Dain Raidlow again as he watched the bald killer empty the dregs from his coffee cup into the fire and pick up his coiled throw-rope.

Pelon was whistling the dirge of a dying cowboy as he started up the hill toward the horse corral, and there was something of a swagger in his walk.

THE moon was about two hours high over the brushy flank of Loma Alta and round as a silver peso. *Mesquitals* and scrub-oak mottes, wet by mists that had started rising from the rain-soaked ground as soon as the sun went down, were ghostly and luminous in the flat white light. The occasional far-out wauling of a catamount on a cold spoor, shrill and keen as the scream of a woman in mortal terror, made the night even spookier.

The Border-jumpers had nearly a thousand head of half-wild mossy-horns strung out in a long, bawling line toward the Arroyo Seco Crossing on the Nueces River—cattle gathered out of the brush by the Rambling R crew and left unguarded after old Rye's death. The outlaws were whooping and yelling and swinging doubled ropes, pushing the herd to the limit and leaving stragglers behind. El Cabrón and three of his gunhung gringos were riding point and acting as a sort of advance guard.

The miles from the camp in the *brasada* had been sheer hell for Dain Raidlow. The bullet-rip in his leg was raw and sore to the touch, and the catgut stitches pulled and jerked at the inflamed flesh like red-hot needles. The night was chill, but his sun-faded blue shirt was soaked with sweat and clung wetly to his back. Under a damp handkerchief that he'd tied over his face to keep out the sifting alkali dust, his skin was the color of old ashes.

With his dust-rimmed eyes bloodshot and full of misery, he hipped in the saddle and stared along the backtrail. The old Texan with the cowhorn mustaches, whom the other outlaws called The Rebel, was riding some fifty yards behind Dain. His job was ostensibly to guard against attack from the rear, but the .30-30 he carried across the pommel of his saddle swung, with seeming carelessness, to cover Dain as the puncher dropped back.

"You're skittish as a colt that's scented cougar, young un'," the old-time outlaw called, pulling down the neck handkerchief that he'd soaked in his canteen and tied over his face. "Shucks, I'd foller that little fellar up on point slap-dab through the gates of hell! The *jefe* knows what he's doing. So just tuck in your shirt-tail, button. R'ar back in the saddle and enjoy the purty scenery."

They trailed down a crumbling claybank slashed stirrup-deep by numerous cattle trails, and wound down a broad, sandy wash into Arroyo Seco. The canyon walls pinched in, and they were riding through near-darkness with the stifling dust rising to blot out the stars directly overhead.

Harrying thoughts poured through Dain's mind as he rode along beside the outlaw, and he formulated and discarded one plan of escape after another. He had the notion that The Rebel, in spite of the outlaw's friendly banter and grin, would shoot him out of the saddle at the slightest pretext. Striving to divert The Rebel's attention, and create a chance to pull his gun and escape, the puncher pointed ahead.

"That *blanco* of Pelon's," he said, "shows up plain as day in the moonlight. Seems funny a man'd ride a stand-out hoss like that on big cattle steal. Enemy eyes could spot that jigger a mile off. Ain't it always best to ride a solid color bronc, Rebel?"

"Right, son," the old-time outlaw answered, somewhat contemptuously. "Pelon is a bull-headed fool. The young fool notches his guns and wears them dude clothes and— *Gawdamighty!*"

The Rebel's startled yell was occasioned by a sudden spattering of shots, muted by rumbling hoofs and rattling horns, that was picked up and amplified in the narrow confines of the canyon and flung back at them in an ever-increasing volume of sound. Dain had the crazy thought that the moon was right for trouble.

Then a slug ruffled the air by his ear and The Rebel's hat was snatched away as if by an invisible hand. The white-haired old outlaw dropped like a pole-axed steer. Two other Border-jumpers were knocked out of the saddle in the next two instants.

THERE was no warning to herald the attack; just the sudden snarl of lead and the vicious rattle of gunfire all around

them on the high cliffs. In an instant the canyon was a mad melee of thunder and confusion and whining death. The brittle crack of saddle guns intermingled with the thud of six-shooters, and the harsh whir of bullets made a lethal undertone that struck a chill to Dain's heart.

Cattle wild as corn-crib rats turned tail and bolted with the first shot, and the earth shook and dust roiled and the stampede was on. Shaggy shapes with great, widespread horns loomed out of the dust-thickened shadows, and Dain spurred before them in a wild race for his life.

The roar of the stampede blotted out all sound of the battle up ahead, and drummed in Dain's ears like a relentless surf pounding up on his heels. The wind stung his eyes and tears streamed down his cheeks.

The puncher cut sharply toward a shallow pocket in the wind-carved wall, marked by a dark up-and-down gash. He ripped his gun up out of the holster and fired point-blank into the faces of the leaders. The targets were shifting, uncertain, and the gun made repeated brilliant flashes against the growing darkness. The almost continuous red light limned three wall-eyed longhorns as they stumbled and fell, and the stampede flowed around them as the puncher plunged on into the shallow pocket.

He was free, then, of the fear-crazed herd and the leaden death that raked the canyon. The respite was momentary, he knew. The still, dust-choked canyon was sweltering hot, but there was a coldness inside him as he reloaded his gun. Soon the mopping-up squads would be combing the canyon, capturing or killing any survivors.

Dain knew he could expect no mercy from the men up there on the high red cliffs. This gun-trap was not the work of the Rambling R. Big Gus Emory, his father's *caporal,* wasn't the kind of man to spring a cold-blooded ambush. He would have given the rustler crew a chance to surrender before smoking them out.

THERE was a strained, sickly grin on Dain's face as he spurred through the ruck of the herd and turned down-canyon. He had his long-barreled Colt .45 gripped in his right hand. He saw a Mexican stop his horse and throw up his hands there in the middle of the canyon. Three or four rifles cracked, and the swarthy *bandido* slumped from the saddle. The riderless horse whirled and galloped away with loose reins dragging, and the puncher had a moment of near panic.

There wouldn't be any prisoners.

The *emboscado* was laid where the canyon walls pinched in to form a chute-like passage down to the muddy Nueces. Caught in that narrow death-trap with little chance of fighting back, El Cabrón was trying to rally his men for a dash in force to the river. Their only hope of escape lay in shooting a way through to the *brasada*—the deadline for lawmen.

That ride was plain hell on the loose, with lead screaming at them from every side. Four men were down in as many seconds, and as yet there was nothing more than shifting gunflashes and dust-blurred shapes up on the cliffs to shoot back at. And when the dust of the stampede cleared away, the remainder of the outfit would make clay-pigeon targets for the straight-shooting *'boscaderos.*

Dain had a glimpse of Pelon, straight and reckless in the saddle, riding his big white horse up the middle of the canyon in plain view of every man on the cliffs. The puncher raked his bronc with spurs and bent low over the mount's neck. Death hailed all around him as he went at a buck-jumping run along the rocky, dangerous slope against the left wall.

A slug slammed into the saddle swells and gouged its way up toward the horn, and the horse staggered under the impact. Another shattered the butt of Dain's saddle gun as he plunged through a thicket of shin-oak and mesquite.

"Down the canyon!" the *jefe* yelled, his voice lifting above the roar of guns and the pain-strident screams of wounded men and horses. "Scatter and ride!"

ORDER was restored in an instant. The outlaws fanned out and spurred after their leader like a line of cavalry on the charge. The *jefe* could ride like a dream. But he fell back, reins in his teeth and shooting at anything that moved up on the cliffs, covering his men on that wild run for the river.

Then Dain saw El Cabrón knocked half out of the saddle by the impact of a bullet

in the back. The *jefe* clawed upright, but his head was sagging and the two six-shooters fell from his nerveless fingers. He swayed for a long moment like a drunk, then lost his grip on the saddle horn and plunged headlong to the ground.

Stunned by this unexpected turn of events, Dain looked back along the canyon. What he saw sent a wild, unreasoning rage churning through his brain. Pelon was riding straight for the fallen *jefe,* a smoking carbine held ready. He was guiding his *blanco* with his knees and levering another shell into the firing chamber of his saddle gun.

Time seemed to stand still while wild thoughts poured through Dain's mind. Pelon had known about this *emboscada.* The bald-headed killer had ridden that big white horse that stood out like a signpost in the moonlight for an obvious reason: *To keep his friends up on the cliffs from shooting at him!* Pelon was in cahoots with the *'boscaderos*—and it was he who'd shot El Cabrón in the back just now.

In that split-second while he waited for the grim drama of death to be enacted, Dain grasped the rest of it. Gar Weaver's payment to El Cabrón for rustling the Rambling R herd had been bait to lure the Border-jumper into Bienvenida Basin. Weaver had hatched this scheme out of his sheepman's brain to wipe out the rustlers, and lay the blame for old Rye Raidlow's bushwhack murder on the bounty-carrying little outlaw.

All of that kaleidoscoped through Dain's mind as Pelon rode up to the fallen rustler and lifted his gun for a point-blank shot. It was cold-blooded murder, as raw and ruthless as butchering a beef. And Dain could see the remnants of the Border-jumping outfit going in a mad rush for the river. A man went down without a sound and a horse crumpled and fell. El Cabrón seemed forgotten in the panic that gripped them.

CHAPTER FOUR

Killer's Revenge

DAIN whirled his horse and rode straight at the back-shooting killer. He tried to yell at Pelon, draw the bald gunman's attention away from the fallen outlaw, but he seemed to have lost his voice.

Pelon stopped his horse and snugged the butt of the saddle gun to his cheek, sighting down at the inert shape on the ground. Dain jerked up his six-shooter and fired three times as fast as he could pull the trigger. At least two of those shots slammed against the breech of Pelon's carbine, inches from his face, and tore the gun from his grasp.

The fourth shot, had those three missed, would have been through the bald killer's heart. Dain viewed Pelon with the same loathing and repugnance he would have accorded a rock rattler.

Pelon's face had turned the dirty gray of an old saddle blanket. There was a trickle of blood on one cheek. He worked his numbed, paralyzed fingers to see if any of them were broken. Then he looked at the slim little puncher whose muddy brown eyes were blazing with all the fury of a desert sun. He lifted his hands to shoulder level.

"My hands are crippled," he called, and Dain could detect no edge of fear in that chill voice. "I can't pull a gun."

With helpless rage clogging his throat and turning his face as yellow as the moon, Dain could only gasp: "Then ride out, damn you!"

He spurred straight at Pelon, earing back the hammer on his gun, and the bald killer whirled his horse and raced for the shadows of the east wall.

"Git 'im!" Pelon screamed at his compadres up on the Arroyo Seco cliffs. "Git that goddam kid. Don't let him out of this canyon alive!"

"He's your bear meat, Pelon," a taunting voice yelled back. "Not lettin' a bald-faced kid run a sandy on you, *amigo?*"

But several rifles were blasting away at Dain, and right then the little puncher wouldn't have given a plugged peso in hell for his chance of escaping this ambush. A slug plucked his hat from his head as he slid to a stop near the fallen outlaw. Another ripped across the roan's rump and he had to fight the pain-crazed animal up to the wounded man.

EL CABRÓN was conscious, struggling to rise on an elbow.

"Ride out, button," he ordered, weakly. "Light a shuck. There's no use'n us both

bein' bushwhack bait. Go on, line out!"

El Cabrón's shirt and coat were soaked with blood, and his lean face was ashen. Somehow Dain helped the wounded outlaw onto the pitching, bullet-boogered bronc. Slugs were plummeting the dirt around them. The puncher snatched up Pelon's carbine and emptied it at shifting shapes up on the cliffs. Then he crawled up behind the *jefe* and jabbed home the spurs.

They were off at a slashing run, with the ugly snarl of lead cutting through the thud of guns and the angry yells of the *'boscaderos* like the drone of hornets. El Cabrón was clinging desperately to the saddle horn, his boot in the left stirrup and Dain's in the right.

Dain could not tell how badly the *jefe* was wounded. The puncher had a burning welt across his shoulder where a bullet had cut his brush-jacket and seared the flesh. But things had been happening so fast that he couldn't even remember when he was shot.

A man had somehow climbed down the steep, wind-carved wall to the floor of the canyon. He reared up in front of them, gripping a smoking Winchester. Dain had a split-second glimpse of a fat, bearded face as he ripped his sixgun up out of the holster and brought it down to bear on the target.

The elemental instinct of self-preservation gave him the speed of a striking whiplash, and his draw was a smooth ripple of motion that ended on the trigger-pull.

The flash of the bearded man's rifle was so close that it blinded the roan, and it staggered and almost fell. Dain winced at the close whine of the slug. But the *'boscadero* was falling, and he screamed once as iron-shod hoofs smashed over a thousand pounds of weight down on his chest.

Dain saw another crouching figure off to the left, and he swung his smoking sixgun over and fired twice. The figure slumped down behind a clump of buckbrush and the puncher was free, then, of the guntrap and the chute-like canyon littered with dead and wounded horses and men.

The river lay ahead, broad and silvery in the moonlight, and they hit the shallow ford at a buck-jumping run. Off-shoot canyons and blow-holes cut off pursuit from above. A last scattering of shots pelted the water around them as they charged full-tilt up the opposite bank and into a belt of brush on the *brasada* side of the muddy river.

"That damn' Peccary Kid," El Cabrón managed, with a strangled laugh. "He's the kind of tough—little son that'd tackle hell with a—bucket of muddy water for a friend! He's the saltiest—little—"

The outlaw's voice trailed off and he slumped across the saddle swells, but his words had warmed Dain Raidlow like the bite of strong whisky. It seemed incredible that he'd hung up his bluff as the boot-tough Peccary Kid—and then lived up to it!

DAIN had hunted this country since childhood, and knew every cow-trail and coulee. Three miles from the crossing, at an off-trail water seep known as Buffalo Springs, he stopped and examined El Cabrón's wound.

The outlaw was still unconscious, his breathing ragged. Dain had to take his knife and cut away El Cabrón's shirt and undershirt, after he'd removed the blood-soaked black claw-hammer coat.

The slug had struck the outlaw in the back, angling up his left side and gouging at his ribs. Dain decided at least two of the ribs were smashed. The ugly, ragged hole where the bullet had mushroomed out was bleeding freely. The puncher cleansed the wound with cold water and tied on a

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mud-and-salt poultice in a strip torn from his shirt.

He didn't give the outlaw much chance to live.

When he had finished the crude bandaging, and washed his hands in the spring, he found El Cabrón watching him through bloodshot dark eyes. Dain half expected the outlaw to break into a tirade, but he didn't. He asked for a drink of water. Then he told the puncher that he'd been expecting something like this and had tried to force Pelon's hand the night before.

"He's a bushwhackin', double-crossin' coyote, young un'. He'd skin his own grandmother alive and tan the hide if he thought somebody'd buy the pelt. Weaver not wantin' to soil his clean sheepman's hands, I figure Pelon framed that gun-trap tonight. You stole his packpot when you rustled me out of that Arjoyo Seco ambush. He was aimin' to kill me and collect that ten thousand Weaver paid to have the Rambling R herd put across the Border. An' maybe cash in on my bounty.

"That money is yours, Dain," he finished. "There's more than ten thousand in this money-belt I'm wearin'. I know a man ain't dead till he's plumb dead, but I got a hunch I won't be needin' that dinero much longer."

Dain had a bottle of tequila in his cantle-roll. He pulled out the whittled stopper with his teeth and handed the bottle to the outlaw.

"You just called me by name," he said flatly. "Reckon you know, then, that I was 'bushed and run out of Bienvenida Basin?"

"You're straddlin' a roan in the Rambling R iron," El Cabrón answered, his voice a croaking whisper. "Brand's haired over, but I can read 'em with my fingers. I heard what Ney said 'bout you coyotin'. but I figure any man except a damn' fool will light a shuck when the deck's stacked agin' him. I'm countin' on you to play my hand out, son, if I don't pull through. You'll do that, Dain? You won't quit me?"

El Cabrón's bloodshot eyes were full of fever as he stared hard into the puncher's bleak muddy-brown eyes. What he read there seemed to satisfy him. He shook his head.

"You ain't no coward. You'll hang Weaver's hide on the fence. I know old Rye Raidlow's son will be in there pitchin' when the cards are all down." His voice seemed to drift out into the deep shadows. "Even the devil in hell hates a quitter, Dain!"

THE puncher wanted to ask why the outlaw had sided him, but El Cabrón's mind was wandering.

"I was just a button," the outlaw mumbled, glassy eyes staring up at the wind-tossed mesquites, "when vigilantes hung my dad and uncle . . . trumped-up cow-thievin' charge. They wanted to hang me, but there was an honest, fearless old cowman that wouldn't let them. Called 'em a pack of thieves worse'n the men they were hanging. Took the noose from my neck and quirted my horse to give me a head start. Man's name was Rye Raidlow. . . .

"Gar Weaver was head of the vigilantes—wanted our homestead. I've never killed a man that didn't pick a fight with me, and never rustled a cow. Run wet cattle across the Border, which is risky business, dodging the Rurales and Rangers on both sides of the river, but it ain't stealin'. Just skippin' inspection and duty payment —blamed with all kinds of crimes I never even heard of.

"Weaver contacted me through Ney, wanted me to do a job for him. When I discovered it was the same man that'd murdered my family, I decided to string along. Hopin' to hang his hide on the fence. . . . "

The outlaw's delirious ranting went on intermittently until a false dawn rimmed the hills in the east with a golden edge of light. Then, in that darkest hour before dawn, the wounded man lapsed into a coma.

Squatting on his hunkers by a slow-burning fire, Dain turned over in his mind the things thus revealed to him by El Cabrón's sick babbling. He could piece together a fair history of the outlaw's years along the Border.

Bitter, hunted years, they were, when El Cabrón had tried more than once to go straight, and each time had run afoul of the law. Bad luck had dogged his trail since that long-ago hanging that had wiped out the only family he'd ever know. Fate seemed to delight in playing tragic jokes on the little outlaw who called himself El

Cabrón. There was grim irony in the name. Life had made him a goat, given him a devilish reputation that he'd done little to earn.

Several times the outlaw had called a woman's name, hopelessly, almost despairingly. But the secret of his own identity never once passed his tortured lips. . . .

THE sun was nearing its zenith when El Cabrón opened his red-rimmed eyes and looked up at Dain. Some of the fever was gone from his glance, but pain had etched deep new lines in his gaunt face.

"You sure made bunch-quitters out of Weaver's gunhands," he grinned twistedly. "An' stood up to that back-shootin' Pelon like the two-legged wolf old Rye always swore he was. You'll stay with me, button?"

Dain gripped the outlaw's hands. Somehow, the little puncher felt humble, infinitely grateful to the outlaw. El Cabrón was the first man that'd ever given him credit for having guts—treated him like a man instead of a misfit.

Dain knew he'd done more than just whip two men and back a bluff with Pelon. He'd whipped a nightmare for keeps. And this dark little outlaw whose own life had been such a miserable failure had given him courage to do it. He felt a lot closer to El Cabrón than he ever had to his own hard-bitten father.

Late that evening Dain made a soft bunk out in the brush from green turpentine weeds, and spread down the saddle blankets. The site was well-hidden. He carried El Cabrón to the bunk, and placed a full canteen and a loaded carbine near at hand. Then he told the outlaw he was riding.

"We need grub," he explained. "I can get that from an old peg-legged halfbreed who runs a trading post at Presidio Crossing. Then, there's the news. I'll probably have to scout for that."

Dain's first destination was the Rambling R ranch. A full moon cut a silver horn against the crest of Loma Alta as he rode down a brushy ridge toward the cluster of 'dobe buildings and sprawling pole corrals. The ranch was dark, muted, with no hint of life. The puncher's heart was thumping against his ribs as he broke from the brush and rode warily toward the front gate.

Then a high-powered rifle streaked the darkness with its jet of flame, and Dain heard the lethal whine of the slug before the sound of the shot reached his ears. He whirled, racing for the brush, bent low in the saddle. Another bullet left its angry drone in his ear and a second ricocheted through the mesquites.

Safe in the screening thickets, he pulled in and studied the dark, shadow-swathed house for nearly a quarter of an hour. There was no way of knowing whether the shots had been fired by friends or enemies. He could not run the risk of hailing them. If syndicate gunmen were forted up at the Rambling R, he would be playing into Weaver's hands by letting them know he was back in Bienvenida Basin.

Reluctantly, he reined his horse around and headed for the old Presidio Crossing on the Nueces.

IT WAS near midnight when Dain rode up to the huge, rambling trading post and tapped on the door with the barrel of his sixgun. A tall, pock-marked halfbreed with graying hair and a leg that ended in a wooden stump answered his summons. The breed looked at the cocked and leveled six-shooter, then gaped at the puncher behind it.

"All alone, Murphy?" Dain demanded. The trader nodded, dumbly, and the puncher grinned, "Then start tossin' grub in a warbag. And talk while you're doing it. I want all the news!"

News travels like wildfire in the cow-country, and the old halfbreed had plenty to tell Dain. A lot of it was distorted range gossip, but Murphy told Dain to swallow it with a grain of salt.

"Pelon he's let hees spurs out to the town hole," the oldster stated. "He's ramrod' that syndicate for Gar Weaver. He's flash' the beeg roll of bills here when he's on the dronk, an' brag 'bout collecting the bounty on El Cabrón. They say that money is really what Weaver pay for have old Rye bushwhacked, but thees Pelon he keep the steef upper lip. He don' say nothing.

"Gus Emory has hole' up like the wolf at the Rambling R. Shoots everybody away with the bullet. They say old Rye is buried there at the ranch. Nobody is invited to the funeral—and that makes me feel ver' bad. Old Rye he's my good frien'.

Nothin' is heard of young Dain Raidlow. But there's a bounty out for some young hellion that is ride with El Cabrón. Hees name Peccary Kid, I theenk. Pelon have brag here that he will collect that bounty, too."

"Has Weaver moved in on the Rambling R?" Dain asked, tensely.

"He's play the cards close to hees belly," Murphy answered. "The Rangers have sent a man down, so Weaver he's ver' quiet. But the Rambling R is mostly public land, with the Raidlows own the water holes. Weaver is move in on that public grazing land purty soon, I theenk."

Dain gave the old trader a letter and made him promise to stop the Laredo mail hack and give it to the driver with personal instructions to see that it was posted in the nearest town. Then he warned Murphy not to mention his visit.

His last purchase was a box of .56-46 shells. The ammunition fit the sawed-off Spencer carbine that Dain had shot out of Pelon's hands in Arroyo Seco. El Cabrón had been shot in the back with the gun. And Dain had little doubt that Pelon was the bushwhacker he'd flushed out of the live-oaks on Crippled Deer Creek.

"I'm usin' them shells on a two-legged coyote," he grinned twistedly. "When the sign is right."

CHAPTER FIVE

Sheep in Hell's Meadows

IT WAS two weeks before El Cabrón could sit up—three before he could hobble around on an improvised crutch. The outlaw seemed to age ten years in that short time. Deep lines were etched around his dark eyes and the corners of his straight-lipped mouth. He let his beard and mustache grow. They came out thick and almost white, and Dain whetted his knife and kept them trimmed. A strong bond of friendship had sprung up between outlaw and outcast cowpuncher.

But Dain was as restless and impatient as a bronc under its first saddle. As soon as El Cabrón was in shape to hobble around camp and do his own cooking, the puncher started prowling Bienvenida Basin. He rode the high ridges, watching all directions at once, carrying the Spencer carbine across his saddle and wearing a new Colt .45 that he'd bought from Murphy.

And on the morning of the fifth day, haggard and unshaven and saddle-weary, the puncher was rewarded by sight of a dirty, woolly mass that flowed across Crippled Deer Creek and spread over the slopes of Loma Alta like a gray tide.

Sheep!

Weaver was finally moving into the range that he'd cleared by having old Rye Raidlow bushwhacked and his son run out of the country.

Five riders accompanied the sheep wagon that was heading toward Sutter's Seep. There was no mistaking the short, wizened shape of Gar Weaver among them. A hard grin pinched in Dain's lips as he turned away. This was it, he told himself bleakly. This was what he'd been waiting for.

The sign was right, now.

This time no shot greeted Dain as he and the gray-bearded outlaw rode up to the Rambling R headquarters. Gus Emory came to the door with a Winchester in his hands. The big ramrod's reddish whiskers were shaggy and untrimmed, and the gunmetal gray eyes, set in deep wells of puffy flesh on either side of his caved-in nose, revealed nothing. He held the door open with the gun-butt and motioned them inside.

The room looked like a boar's nest. Someone had been cooking on the pot-bellied heater, and wood chips and ashes were scattered over the floor. Dirty dishes were stacked in a chair. There was a keen smell of medicine in the room, mingled with the odors of horse-sweat and tobacco and sickness.

A THIN, wasted figure lay on a cot in one corner. The man was gaunt to the point of emaciation, his bony frame clearly defined under taut yellow skin. There was an old hickory-handled sixgun on a chair beside the cot. The wounded man picked up the gun in a trembling hand and leveled it at Dain. His feverish pale-gray eyes blazed with the hot, unrelenting wrath that the puncher had seen in old Rye's eyes so many times in the past.

"I oughta gut-shoot you!" the old man rasped. "Where you been hidin'?"

Somehow, it didn't seem strange that the tough old rancher was still alive, cling-

ing to that thin thread of life in the tenacious way he'd always grasped and held things.

"Go ahead and shoot," Dain Raidlow said flatly.

His gaze locked with the irascible old man's, unflinchingly. Old Rye's hand was trembling as he laid the gun aside. There was wonderment in his eyes and admiration, too, mingled with anger.

"You told the truth 'bout jumpin' that bushwhacker," Gus Emory broke the long silence. "I picked up your trail and followed to the spot where you swapped shots."

"Weaver's outfit camped at Sutter's Seep this morning," Dain told him, grimly. "Weaver was with them. I figured you and some of the crew might ride with me—to the Seep."

The ramrod shook his head. "Word got around that the syndicate was out to get every man ridin' for the Rambling R. The crew quit. But I reckon I'll side you, Dain."

There was a twisted grin on the big ramrod's face. He held out his hand. Dain gripped it. There was a lump in his throat, and he found speech difficult when he introduced Gus Emory to the bearded little outlaw. The ramrod shook hands with the outlaw and said he was glad to meet "Mister Jeff Carter."

Old Rye dragged himself erect and buckled on his old service-worn gunbelt. Clammy sweat dripped in globules big as buckshot from his ashen face as he fumbled for his boots, but his mouth was clamped in a thin, hard line.

"Saddle my hoss, Gus," he ordered. "That bay Diablo. He'll stand hitched while a man's shootin' from the saddle. Damn' good hoss to ride into a gun ruckus."

Gus Emory's face paled a little under its freckled tan, but he nodded. He was remembering what the Mesa Verde medico had said about the slug lodged in old Rye's back, against his spine. "I can't operate," the doctor had warned them. "Too dangerous. You'll spend the rest of your life in bed, Rye, or in a wheel-chair. Walk or straddle a horse, and that bullet will move. It's right agin' your backbone. An' when it does move, you won't live the day out!"

Gus Emory went to saddle the horses. He told Dain he'd rope out two fresh mounts for him and Jeff Carter.

Old Rye pulled on his boots and stood up, weak and trembling. But the gnarled, brush-scabbed hand that he held out to Dain was rock-steady.

"Maybe you'll shake hands with me, too, son," he said, huskily. "Laid up in bed that away, I've had plenty of time to think. An' I'm ready to admit that I've been a bronc-headed fool!"

IT WAS a strange fighting outfit that left the ranch and headed for Sutter's Seep. As Gus Emory had said, with a mirthless grin, the outfit was shot all to pieces before it ever got into the fight.

El Cabrón—who had taken the name of Jeff Carter—rode beside Dain. The outlaw's wound had never properly healed, and his bearded face was pale and drawn.

Riding some fifty yards behind them, Gus Emory lowered his voice to ask old Rye how he was making out. The rancher shook his head, and his grin was ghastly.

"I felt that slug move, Gus," he answered. "Now I don't feel a thing. I'm paralyzed from the waist down."

Gus Emory grunted like he'd had his wind kicked out. He rode closer to old Rye in order to catch him if he fell.

They crossed Crippled Deer Creek without getting their saddle-skirts wet, and turned up a narrow hogback ridge. They crossed another ridge and still another, and came out on a brushy slope that tumbled down to Sutter's Seep.

It was nearing noon, and the still heat was as oppressive as a smothering blanket. The herders and dogs were off with the sheep. The gringo gun-guard was squatting around a brush fire.

There was instant activity in the sheep camp when the Rambling R hove in sight. Dain saw Gar Weaver, small and wizened and with a face as sharp and shrewd as a weasel's, backing to the safety of the wagon.

Dain saw Slater and Sam Ney, and the hatred in the latter's gaze was unmistakable. A lanky, stooped halfbreed stood near the fire with a Winchester in his hands. But Dain's stare swept past him to Pelon.

The bald-headed killer was standing well apart from the rest of the crew, his lips peeled back in an ugly snarl.

Dain had Pelon's bullet-scarred Spencer carbine across his saddle swells. That old knot of fear was back in his belly, twisting his guts and draining his body of strength. His heart was hammering violently against his ribs. But Dain had conquered that fear before, and he knew now that he could will his body to do what had to be done. He made his voice quiet, almost impersonal.

"You and me, Pelon."

"Me and you, button!"

DAIN didn't know which one of the syndicate gunhands fired the first shot. But it saved his life. His mount shied and whirled away at the flat explosion, and Pelon's shot missed his head by inches.

Then Dain Raidlow's saddle carbine was spitting fire back at Pelon; six-shooter and .56-46 slugs were whining like hornets. A bullet laid its red-hot pain across Dain's shoulder. Another hit him a numbing blow inches from that first wound and nearly tore him from the saddle. But he kept on shooting as fast as he could eject the empties and jack new shells into the firing chamber.

Pelon staggered as a steel-jacketed slug smashed him in the chest. He doubled over as the second shot plowed into his belly. He slid to the ground and kicked once as his life drained out those ugly wounds in his chest and belly.

Dain had been conscious of the thunder of other guns as he shot it out with Pelon. Now all of that had ceased.

Slater and Sam Ney were dead, sprawled grotesquely by the fire. The halfbreed was swaying back and forth, bloody hands clutched over his belly, his eyes wide and stunned and blood-red with pain. Old Rye was on the ground, a grin on his face and two smoking sixguns gripped in his hands. Gus Emory was holding a bullet-shattered arm and cursing softly.

Then the fading rumble of hoofbeats caught the puncher's ear, and his mind flashed back to the quick creak of saddle leather and the pound of hoofs that had mingled with the sudden roar of battle. Gar Weaver was making a run for it—with El Cabrón hot on his heels.

Dain's attention had been riveted on Pelon, and the things that had happened around him came to him now like half-forgotten memories. He felt dazed, drained of feeling. He swung down and squatted on his hunkers beside old Rye, and Gus Emory joined him, twisting a handkerchief around his arm to stop the bleeding.

Shot twice through the chest, old Rye was dying fast. He looked up at his son and managed a weak grin.

"Don't fret, son. It's all in the game. Even the devil in hell hates a quitter. And all I wanted was a—spur-jingling—wolf whelp. I got that. I—"

The rancher's head sagged. Blood gushed

from his throat. A spasm of trembling shook his body, and it was all over.

Gus Emory made a big pot of coffee while they waited for El Cabrón. The big ramrod wanted to trail Weaver, too, but Dain shook his head. Weaver, he told Emory, was Jeff Carter's bear meat. There was an old score to be settled between them.

The halfbreed died before the coffee started boiling, and Dain helped Gus Emory load the dead gunmen in the sheep wagon.

El Cabrón rode up just as they'd finished the task. The little outlaw had escaped the gunfight unscathed. There was a queer, tight grin on his bearded lips. He swung down and poured himself a cup of coffee before he said a word.

"Weaver got away," he told them, finally. "But the Border-jumping outlaw that called hisself El Cabrón didn't fare so well. He was down there on the creek, too. Probably ridin' to join the sheep outfit when he heard guns. In about a month one of us will find his body lodged on a sand bar down Crippled Deer a ways.

"It'll be badly decomposed, and identification will be impossible. But there will be a money-belt with El Cabrón's name burned on it. There'll be a ring and a watch and a pair of silver-mounted spurs. Anybody that's ever seen El Cabrón can identify those articles.

"Weaver," he repeated, "got away. He won't stop until he's plumb out of the country. We'll never hear of Gar Weaver agin. We might spread the word around that he headed for the Argentine."

THE RAMBLING R had two visitors in the week that followed the funeral of Rye Raidlow. One of them was Dad Thorp, the marshal from Mesa Verde. The honest old lawman had warrants for the arrest of El Cabrón and one of his lieutenants, the Peccary Kid. But neither of those two gents resembled Dain Raidlow nor an old broken-down cowpoke like Jeff Carter, the marshal grinned. The lawman and Jeff Carter took a shine to each other right off.

The second visitor came as a result of the letter than Dain had given the halfbreed Murphy to mail. Dain felt this mission too important to entrust to anyone else, and he met the mail hack in person.

Dain was certain some mistake had been made when he saw the lone passenger that the driver handed down with a touch of gallantry. He'd been expecting an older woman, gray-haired, with an old pain in her eyes. This girl was young, pretty, smiling rather self-consciously at finding herself a stranger in a strange town.

In answer to a question, the driver pointed to Dain, and she came toward him. She had hair the color of burnished copper, and she was wearing a black silk dress that did things for her shapely figure and —to use Dain's words—peaches and cream complexion. The little spray of freckles across her short nose did nothing to detract from her fresh young loveliness.

The puncher, still walking with a limp from that old wound that Pelon had given him, and carrying his right arm in a sling, was so embarrassed and upset by the appearance of this unexpectedly pretty apparition that he could only stammer answers to her questions about her father.

Father! From El Cabrón's feverish ranting, he'd been led to expect a wife or sweetheart!

"Jeff's all right," he managed, feeling inexplicably happy about the whole thing. "He's ramroddin' my— You're really his daughter. You ain't—"

"I'm Dale Carter," she smiled. "I haven't seen my father in years. I've been teaching school in Junction City. I'd just about given him up for lost."

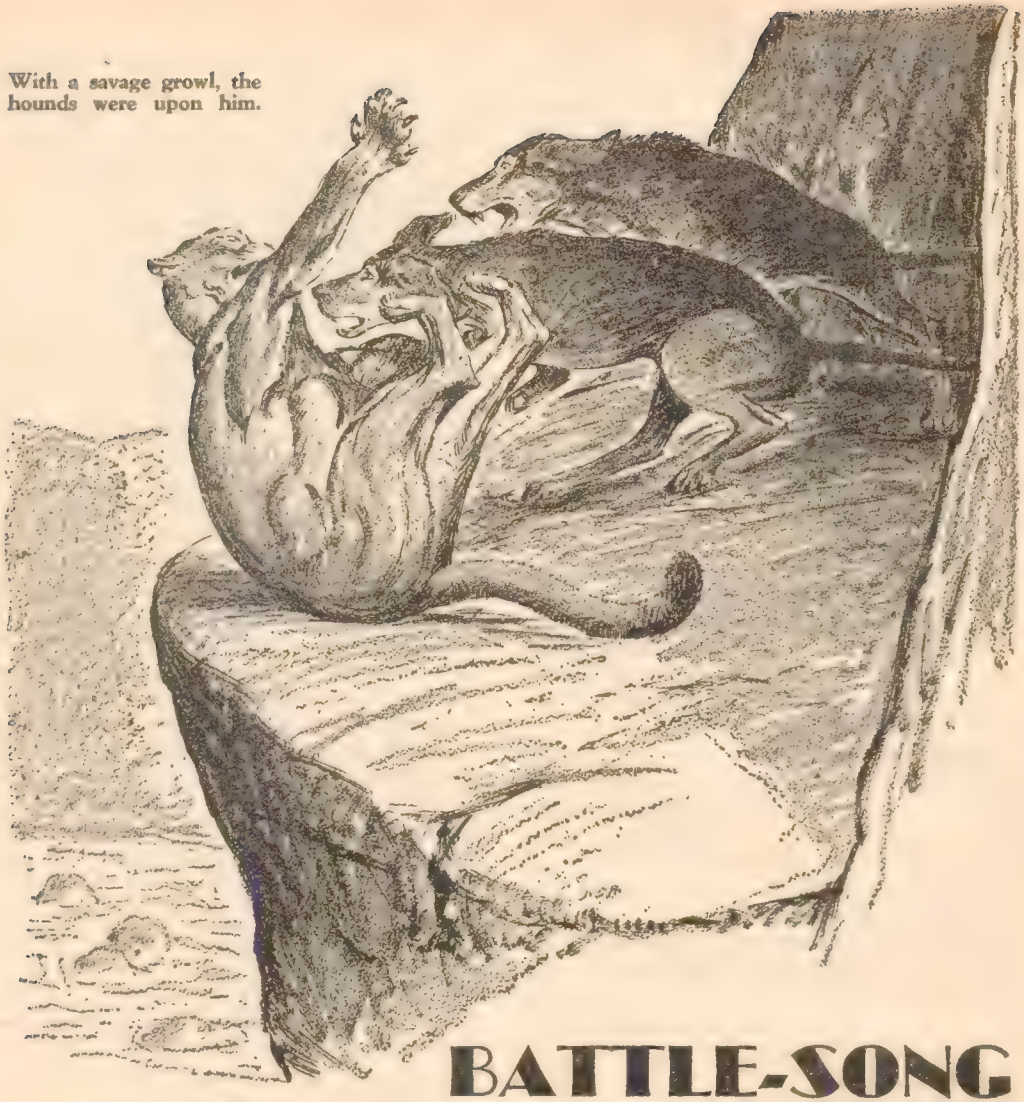
Dain Raidlow had finally recovered his wits. He told the girl that her father had been sort of helping the law. And he made old Dad Thorp give Jeff Carter a badge to back up his story. When Dale threw her arms around the one-time outlaw's neck and called him "Father!" Dain saw tears of happiness in his friend's eyes. And he knew he'd squared that old debt for keeps.

Later, when Dain had taken the girl out to show her the remuda and let her pick out a horse that he meant to give to her, Jeff Carter looked at Dad Thorp and grinned. His voice was husky.

"Dain Raidlow will make a crackajack son-in-law!"

"He will," old Dad agreed. "In spite of his size, that little son is a lot bigger man than old Rye ever was!"

THE END



With a savage growl, the hounds were upon him.

BATTLE-SONG OF THE WILD ONES

By CONRAD G. FEIGE

The Two-Legged Ones had a law that said, "You shall not kill what is Man's." But Crooked-Foot, the mountain lion, knew only the code of the wild: "Kill or be killed!" . . . and in the trackless Wyoming hills, Crooked-Foot showed that his law was the greater.

UNDER the rising moon, the little stream gleamed like a ribbon of molten silver as it rushed down from nearby snow-mantled peaks. A faint breeze sighed eerily through the pines that hemmed it in. There was silence, and then, rudely, the long drawn-out bay of a hound hot on the scent.

With startling suddenness a great, tawny

body shot out of the timber and bounded across the stream, to vanish into the inky shadows on the opposite side. But now, in an eddy of the stream, a dark spot glowed crimson and widened. Crooked-Foot, the mountain lion, was wounded.

Lanky sides heaving, yellow eyes wide with pain, Crooked-Foot ran silently through the forest. He came to a ravine, and descending into this, followed its tortuous course until he hit the base of a huge windfall. Here he stopped, but for a moment only. Roving, his yellow orbs discovered the black maw of an opening and quickly he crawled within. Seconds later he emerged on the up-slope side. Past experience had taught him that the fallen logs and jumbled debris offered only a temporary haven of safety from the dreaded man-creature and his dogs. It was up where the rocks needled into sharp crags and jumbled boulders that he stood a chance of losing them.

But now he was injured, and when a sharp stick jabbed his shoulder he jumped to one side, snarling in helpless anger. Too, his strength was failing rapidly. He had lost much blood.

Hungry from the long severe winter months, Crooked-Foot had taken a chance on killing a young lamb that had wandered from the main flock in the meadow near a rambling log cabin. A shrill bleat of pain and fright, and then he had the luckless animal in his jaws and was loping with it toward the safety of pines and dense aspen.

From the head of the valley where the ranch house was, he had heard a faint shout. He hadn't stopped, and it was only when he was far back in the trees that he had dropped his victim to begin the feast.

In the semi-dusk, he was gorging himself when suddenly he whipped about, tensed. Faintly borne on the breeze he had caught a scent—Man! At the same instant he had felt the hot pain of the bullet as it furrowed deep into his shoulder; then heard the shot. Filled with unreasoning fury, he had slashed futilely at his hurt side. Then, sensing the greater danger to come, he had whipped about and bounded away into the timber.

COMING to the head of the ravine, Crooked-Foot found it was a dead end with sides steep and high. Hurriedly he trotted about, seeking for a way up. There was none. Suddenly he stopped, crouched low, then gave a mighty jump and started up, splayed claws plowing into the soft dirt. Just as he reached the top he heard the frantic baying of the hounds as they came to the windfall. Momentarily he had halted them; they thought he was cornered.

Crooked-Foot forged on steadily through the dense timber. Minutes later his short ears pricked up. Behind him the frenzied baying had stopped, and again there was a long howl as the hounds found the continuing scent. Running at a ragged lope, he eyed a towering pine. If need be, up in one of those he could find refuge. But best were the rocky crags looming only a short distance away.

Fifty yards farther on the pines became studded with huge boulders. But the race was going to be close, Crooked-Foot knew. There was a savage bay behind him, and he whirled. At the edge of a small clearing he had just crossed, he saw the first of the hounds—a great beast with lolling tongue, flapping ears and bony, muscled body.

Crooked-Foot turned again, then stopped in alarm, tail swishing angrily. He was at the edge of the crags, but he had never been in this particular region before. Where formerly he had leaped lightly from boulder to boulder, now he was at the base of a sheer cliff. To climb those steep sides would be impossible in his normal condition, let alone wounded as he was.

Nevertheless, he coiled his muscles and gave a tremendous leap. Scrambling madly, he got up about fifteen feet, then lost his hold and fell back to the base of the precipice. Blood spurted anew from the bullet-wound.

With an angry snarl, Crooked-Foot spun about as he heard the foremost hound yap wildly. The slavering brute was barely fifty feet away, rounding a large moon-drenched boulder. Then, to one side he saw it: a giant pine that the years had rotted until now it was uprooted and leaning at a sharp angle against the cliff-face. With one leap, Crooked-Foot landed on it and started climbing.

He was just in time.

The lead hound lunged forward, teeth bared. A good twelve feet the dog leaped through the air at the mountain lion—so close that the cat's tail brushed his ear. His spread paws scraped the loose bark, he

twisted grotesquely about, then lit on the ground in an ungainly heap.

Crooked-Foot climbed higher as the hound raised bedlam below. Shortly the dog was joined by his mate, and now the din was almost unbearable. Turning, the great cat gazed down, yellow eyes glaring balefully. Slowly, tail twitching angrily, he edged further up until he was a good sixty feet above the ground.

At that instant, the tree creaked and gave. Crooked-Foot's weight was loosening the tree-top from its anchorage high on the cliff-face. Sensing this new danger, the cat looked wide-eyed about him. There was a jar as the tree slipped again, then began a rapid fall.

Crooked-Foot saw a small ledge on the cliff-face and made a lunge for it. His front claws caught on an outcropping of the rock, his hind legs scratched furiously, and he crawled upon the flat shelf, invisible from below.

Below him there was a thunderous crash as the pine hit the earth. The hounds stopped their baying, then charged forward again, their wails rending the air anew.

TWO minutes later there was a crashing of underbrush as Jeff Logan and Pete Lawson came spurring forward on lathered mounts.

"The hounds got him treed!" Logan shouted, and pulled his plunging horse up short.

Lawson joined him, then let out a curse. "Now where the hell did that cat go to?" he demanded.

"Them dogs are nearly crazy," Logan said, gazing intently at the sheer precipice. "Don't tell me that cat sprouted wings and flew up that wall!"

"Impossible," Lawson declared, craning his neck upward. "No critter alive can scale that. It's slick as a blackboard and straight up."

"But look at Old Blue," the rancher protested. "He's trying his dangedest to climb up." As they watched the hound made a running start, got about ten feet up, then tumbled back again.

But after a half-hour of scanning the cliff-face, of peering into the tops of surrounding pines, the rancher and his helper were confused and baffled.

"Maybe," Lawson began at last, squirting a string of tobacco juice, "that cat is one of them haunts you read about."

"Tommyrot!" the rancher snapped. "If it's old Crooked-Foot, and I think it is, he just dug his claws in the stone and walked right on up!"

That seemed to settle the issue. Neither gave more than a casual glance to the aged pine lying in the shadows. Pulling out leashes, the two men snapped up the dogs, then rode slowly back into the shadowy timber.

High up on the ledge, the rumble died in Crooked-Foot's throat. For a while his tail twitched spasmodically, then slowly he closed his eyes. Fatigued and weak from loss of blood, he slept.

It was a slanting sun glinting on early-morning frost that awakened Crooked-Foot. His yellow eyes blinked wide open. For a while he stared about him, at the tree-tops level with his body, and far in the distance the plume of smoke curling heavenward. He could not know that the smoke came from rancher Jeff Logan's cabin. All Crooked-Foot knew was that he was alive and hungry.

He yawned and stretched, and immediately let out a snarl as his wound pained him. Somehow he managed to get to his feet where he weaved about unsteadily. For a while he stood there, then sank weakly back down again.

All that day the big cat remained on the narrow ledge, nursing his strength. The sun was rolling down behind the mountains when he finally stood up again. This time he remained standing, and now his yellow orbs quested about for a means of getting down off the cliff.

To his right the ledge widened, hugging the stone face, and started zigzagging upward. He followed this cautiously, and half an hour found him lapping thirstily at a small stream that cascaded down from masses of rocks and boulders higher up.

Then the cat did a strange thing. Mincing forward, he walked a couple of feet into the stream, then flopped suddenly down into the icy liquid. Here he lay motionless, yellow eyes blinking at long intervals. Fever was coursing through the body of Crooked-Foot, and the cat was doing the only thing he knew to relieve the agony of the fires within him.

THE silver-dollar moon was almost straight overhead when Crooked-Foot finally arose and walked out of the stream. If hunger still claimed him, he gave no sign of it. Instead, he slowly followed the stream bank, stopping now and then to eat green shoots of grass beside it. Once he dug into the bank, then ate the roots of some plant. It was bitter, and his jaws dripped saliva.

He padded off into the timber, his keen nose questing into clumps of shrubbery and small hollows. At last he found what he was looking for—a scooped-out place beneath some boulders that was lined with dry pine-needles. Warily he stepped on the soft mat, turned about several times, then flopped weakly down.

This time Crooked-Foot slept the sleep of exhaustion. It was mid-forenoon of the second day when he got up, stiff and hungry. But he was completely rid of the fever, and already his wound was beginning to heal.

Moving furtively, Crooked-Foot went through the timber in a direction where he knew there was a game trail. An hour later he hovered in the lower branches of a pine tree directly above a well-beaten path. He lay on the limb, unmoving, eyes alert, waiting patiently.

Time passed and the sun slid past the meridian before he tensed suddenly. He shifted imperceptibly, got a better view of the doe as she came along the trail at a sedate walk.

Unconscious of the danger that threatened, the doe stopped about twenty feet away and nibbled at a stray bunch of grass. At last she lifted her head, large ears pricked, eyes luminously bright. Satisfied, she walked on again toward the pine.

When she was directly under the tree, Crooked-Foot pounced down at the doe. His aim was good, but on one thing he had miscalculated: his wounded left shoulder. At the crucial moment the wound contracted cruelly and he left the limb at an angle. As if released from a catapult, he zoomed past the doe's neck, side-shooting his mark.

Instantly the frightened doe shot up the trail, the white flag of her tail high as she bounded with rocket-like speed through the dense timber.

For several great leaps Crooked-Foot took after her, a tawny streak, then came to a sullen stop. This wasn't the first time he had missed a deer, and he knew the uselessness of trying to outrun one of the creatures.

TWICE more that afternoon Crooked-Foot missed his chance for a meal. Once when he stalked a lone elk a tedious half-hour, only to have the slight crack of a breaking twig betray him as he eased the weight off his painful left shoulder. And the second time when he jumped at a whistling marmot just as the fat brown fellow eluded him by slipping into a hole between two stones.

Crooked-Foot tried to rip the stones aside, to dig after his victim, but in the rocky soil it was useless. So it was that the moon was riding high in a diamond-studded sky the third night, and he still hadn't eaten since the lamb.

In the pines about him the breeze sighed mysteriously of far-off places. Several times Crooked-Foot got a faint smell of smoke from the cabin far down the mountain, and the crisp odor of frying bacon. He jaws slavered.

In the moonlight he was a phantom shape of brown as he moved over a low ridge and into another valley. Here he came to a large clearing where he jumped upon a boulder to survey his surroundings. Immediately his short ears tilted forward.

Where only a week ago the clearing had been lifeless, now there were many dim forms moving slowly about. Cattle! The fat slow beasts that the hated man-creature cared for so tenderly. And then Crooked-Foot flattened on the boulder. Not far from him, almost unnoticed, was a small dark spot. A young calf, tightly curled up to avoid the cold—sleeping peacefully while its mother browsed not far away.

Like a ghostly streak of brown, Crooked-Foot slid off the boulder. At the bottom he flattened, then began belly-creeping forward. He was ravenous, and this time there must be no mistake. Slowly, inch by inch, he edged forward. Now he was only thirty feet away from the calf, now twenty. And then, like a cannon ball, he tore straight at his prey.

The bawl of the stricken calf echoed in the valley like the discordant note of a bugle. There was a wild snorting, a wilder bellowing, and then the herd of full-bred Herefords was thundering down the valley,

the cries of the small calf ringing in their ears.

"BY THE holy gee!" Jeff Logan swore next day. "That damn' cat again."

"It's Crooked-Foot, all right." Pete Lawson was kneeling beside the stripped carcass of the calf. "Here's his right front print where you caught him in that coyote trap two years ago."

"That slinking devil certainly gets around," Logan said, dropping the reins and dismounting beside the other. "It's a good twelve miles from the ranch to this valley."

"You musta missed him the other night," Lawson said. "He's plenty alive and raising hell."

"I didn't miss him," Logan said. "The blood-spots proved that. It just must of been a flesh wound. It was kind of dark there in the timber."

"Guess you're right," Lawson agreed. "But what you gonna do about the cattle?"

"One of us has got to stay with the herd at night, or we'll have to drive them into the meadow next to the ranch. And I hate to do that. I want that grass to grow for early haying."

"Well, in that case it looks like I'm bedding out tonight," Lawson stated.

"But not for long," Logan said grimly. "I'm goin' to have the State send us Tom Harris, the bounty-hunter. He'll either git that cat or drive him out of the territory."

Two nights later Crooked-Foot made his second attack on the herd. This time he picked a young bull that was feeding near the stream. Crouching low, he slunk through the willow underbrush until he got within forty feet of the unsuspecting beef. Then he made a mad rush and lunged at the bull before it even had a chance to raise its head.

The terrified bellow of pain that echoed in the creek bottoms brought Pete Lawson upright in his sleeping bag. The fire he'd lit earlier in the evening was completely dead. Fumbling, he found his rifle where it was rolled in his bedding to protect it from the night air.

Again the bellow rang out down by the stream bed. Jumping to his feet, Lawson let out a wild yell and fired into the night.

With a savage thrust, Crooked-Foot sank his teeth into the neck of the bull, then jumped off the animal at the sharp rifle-report. Already the beef was down on his knees, jugular vein ripped wide. Noiselessly the cat galloped off into the nearby timber while behind him the meadow echoed and re-echoed with sporadic shots from Pete Lawson's rifle.

When Jeff Logan brought his hired hand supplies the next day, he cursed luridly and long. "That settles it," he said at last. "We're driving them up to the ranch house meadow. I'll lose a thousand dollars before Harris shows up. He's over in the Big Horns and won't be here until late next week."

CROOKED-FOOT didn't know that doomsday was being prepared for him. Nor did he mind the fact that his easy picking of beef had been taken away. Winter was past, his wound was healing with surprising speed, and now that his strength had returned he found his usual quota of game easy to catch.

Although Tom Harris, the bounty-hunter, was supposed to arrive within the week, delays set in and it was nearly a month later that he appeared. And during this time, in a wild canyon fifty miles away, Crooked-Foot went courting.

It was one night just after he had eaten his fill on a silly snow-shoe rabbit that he stood on a high ledge overlooking the canyon. For a while he surveyed the ghostly, moon-sprayed canyon walls below him, then sat down and lifted his head. At the blood-curdling scream he loosed, the little creatures of the wild trembled and ran helter-skelter for their nearest places of safety.

As the echoes faded into the distance, Crooked-Foot listened. And then it came, *"Ahhhroooerrrr!"*—an answering cry from somewhere up by the headwaters of the jagged canyon.

Crooked-Foot got to his feet, then whirled as another piercing scream came from the timber at his rear. A slow rumble formed deep down in his throat. The first cry was from a she-cat, but the last one was from a wandering male. The chances for a scrap were good.

It was where a large beaver dam blocked the sinuous stream in the canyon that he saw the female. She was mincing toward him gingerly on the surface of the dam. Deliberately Crooked-Foot sat down and

waited until she got closer, only the slow curling of his tail betraying the fact that he was aroused.

When the female was almost up to him he whipped about suddenly. His long whiskers twitched as he scented the other cat approaching. And then he saw his adversary, a young male that slunk out of the forest with stealthy grace.

Overhead blue-tinted cottonball clouds were scudding beneath the sliced half-melon moon. Just as one of these slid past, painting the scene into weird shapes of silver and black, the two great cats came together.

It was Crooked-Foot who made the initial charge. Bounding high into the air, head held sideways, he came down at the other cat with his forepaws shredding viciously. But with a lightning twist the younger male slapped over on his back, and four pair of feet made contact.

The two cougars approached each other cautiously. Spitting, snarling and biting, they lashed at each other with taloned claws as they parried back and forth. Once Crooked-Foot failed to turn quickly enough and his enemy landed on him with all four deadly feet. Flashing, he did a complete somersault and the tables were reversed. Just as quickly the other sprang away, and again they fenced for position.

In black silhouette against the silver mirror of the beaver pond, the female sat down and watched alertly, only her pricked ears showing her interest.

It was a sudden dagger-like rush of Crooked-Foot's that did it. Shooting forward, he stopped, then slashed out with his right paw. It was a wicked stroke, of deadly intent and well aimed. It caught the young male squarely on the cheek, ripping the flesh from his left eye down to his under jaw.

With a quick movement the young male spun about, then galloped in defeat back to the black timber.

For awhile after that Crooked-Foot sat silently and watched the female. Finally he got up and approached her cautiously. She lashed a rapiered claw at him, but he evaded it easily, and in return gave a masterful yowl. Then the night air was filled with the spits and snarls of their strange courtship. In the end the two cats vanished into the willow underbrush down-canyon together.

FOR two weeks Crooked-Foot and his new wife played and fought, as they completed a wide circle that led slowly back to the holdings of Jeff Logan. Then one night, high on a ledge overlooking the valley, Crooked-Foot let out one of his weird screams just to show how good he felt.

Inside the comfortable ranch house, Jeff Logan jumped to his feet excitedly. "What'd I tell you, Tom," he said to his guest who was seated in a bearskin-covered rocker. "There's that hellion back again, wanting more of my stock."

"By God, it's just like a woman's scream," Tom Harris said. "I've heard cries like that all my life, but I never hear one without getting cold shivers up and down my spine."

"Anyhow, I'm mighty thankful you're here on the job," Logan said. "That cat's been giving me nightmares long enough."

"First thing come morning, I'll take my dogs and scout around, see if I can pick up his trail," Harris said. "My dogs are good. The cat ain't born that can lose them once they get the scent!"

"Hope you're right," Logan said somberly. "Anyhow, here's wishing you luck."

Habitually Crooked-Foot roamed in a fifty- to seventy-five mile circle. And always he ended up north by the turbulent waters of a river chained in a deep, wide gash in the earth. His desire to explore the unknown territory on the other side was subdued by his fear of swimming the terrible foam-flecked stream. So he always finished by posing statue-like on a jutting crag above the treacherous waters and screaming his defiance into the rugged wilderness.

That night it rained, and so, unwittingly, Crooked-Foot gained a day's start on Tom Harris as he headed to the north. The two cats traveled as a pair, for the mating season was here. Once they killed a deer, another time an aged bull elk; and there was always the easier prey of chipmunks, squirrels and smaller animals.

ON THE third evening Crooked-Foot and his mate heard a faint baying. They were holed up in a dry cavern-like niche beneath a mass of tumbled boulders, when the cry came floating up on the still, thin air. Crooked-Foot got uneasily to his feet, memory of that other chase revived in his mind. He left the den and started higher up the mountain, and the she-cat followed him obediently.

Not three miles to their rear, Tom Harris and two anxious hounds were pursuing them relentlessly. They had gotten a fresh scent early that morning, and all day they had followed the two cats' erratic night wanderings, stopping only once when an unexpected shower caused them to lose the trail temporarily.

When Crooked-Foot again heard the cry he was appalled at its nearness. Though he was in craggy country, it was not nearly high enough, and a man on horseback could easily keep up with the dogs. Crooked-Foot broke into a loping run.

Once, on a jutting ridge, he looked back and saw the man on the horse as they trotted across a small clearing. They disappeared into the timber, and now Crooked-Foot heard the baying hounds clearly. Beside him the tawny female looked at him expressionlessly as he started on again.

Fifteen minutes later the cats were both breathing heavily as they left the long ridge they had been following and started into a more heavily-timbered region. Here, suddenly, the she-cat left Crooked-Foot and turned to one side where a group of large pines spired into the sky. Crooked-Foot paused a moment with a pleading whine, then maintained a straight course toward the north.

Some time later Crooked-Foot heard the frantic baying of the hounds. If he guessed that they had treed his mate in a pine, his only reaction was to lope onward faster.

GAUNT and desperate, Crooked-Foot ran on. Now he was in the region of the large river to the north. Here the country was rocky, with needling spires of granite cutting into the sky. The frantic yelps of the hounds had long since ceased, and now there was a deep-throated baying that told him that they were not far behind. Though Crooked-Foot had hoped to elude them by this time in the jumbled rock hell about him, he found that Harris and the hounds were gaining on him with alarming speed.

And then he discovered what he had been searching for—a narrow trail between the rocks. It was a sure place to lose the man-beast, and by jumping from boulder to boulder later on, a chance to give the hounds the slip.

But for once Crooked-Foot's plans went astray. Soon he found himself in a narrow fissure of the earth from which not even he could climb. Coming to a sharp turn, he stopped with a devilish snarl. Not over a hundred yards behind him, echoing and re-echoing, came the cries of the hounds.

Crooked-Foot's tail swished angrily as he looked about for a place to make a stand. He slipped on farther through the fissure as it gradually went up, the split becoming narrower with sharp rocks jabbing at him cruelly.

Then he gave a bound and rushed forward. Ahead of him there was daylight!

At that second the narrow walls reverberated awesomely as the first hound let out a crazed yelp close behind him. Glancing about, Crooked-Foot saw the red-eyed dog come charging at him. Snarling, he turned and ran for the sliver of light ahead of him.

With explosive suddenness, he burst out of the fissure and came to a haunched stop.

And none too soon. He was perched on top of the world, his body on a table rock hardly four foot square.. And below that was nothing! Nothing but empty air, with far below a winding ribbon of green that was the river—the river which had always baffled him.

EYES roving wildly, Crooked-Foot whirled about, seeking a possible avenue of escape. There was none—just the fissure that led to this flat rock. Then, above him, he saw something that looked like a small ledge. Crouching, Crooked-Foot steeled his muscles for a mighty leap. He never made it.

With a savage growl the lead hound burst out of the fissure, his companion hot on his heels. Instantly the cat met his adversaries with toothed fang and claw. Sharp talons lanced out of the soft pads, and then there was a rolling mass of clawing, biting cat and snapping hounds.

On such a small arena, none of the three stood a chance. Writhing in a twisting, savage ball, they abruptly sailed over the edge.

At the feather sensation of flying, they parted in mid-air. Yellow orbs wide with fright and anger, Crooked-Foot spun down feet first, ready to land upright. Once he saw a hound, flapping-eared and spraddle-legged near him, its eyes greenishly bright, a gargoylish shape against the velvet blue dome of the sky. Then, below him, with horror in his soul, he saw the surface of the raging river.

Crooked-Foot never knew what hit him. Coming down belly-first, he felt the wind completely knocked out of him, then submerged like a lead shot into a wet hell from which there was no escape.

Stunned, lungs bursting, feet flailing, he fought for surface. Again and again he slammed into slimy black boulders. Javelin-like rocks punctured his flesh. Stinging water cut his eyes. And then, with cork-like buoyancy, he burst to the top and air rushed into his lungs like cooling camphor.

A quarter-mile downstream, Crooked-Foot climbed dejectedly out of the water and onto a small sand bar. Just once he stopped and looked back at the raging river, and then across to the other side. Here he saw another shape crawl onto the bank. It was Tom Harris's lead hound, beaten and almost dead from the stream's pummeling. The other hound was still in midstream, a pulpy dead mass, nearing the edge of a high waterfall.

Tail dragging low, Crooked-Foot disappeared into the thick timber on the north side of the river.

THE young ranger got up from where the mutilated body of the cow elk lay in a patch of willow brush.

"I hate those damn' cats," he said to the older ranger sitting his horse nearby. "That's the second cow that puma has killed this month."

"By the tracks, I'd say he was a giant," the other man mused. "Had something happen to his right forefoot, judging by the way it looks so crooked."

"I'd like to kill all those cats," the younger ranger said. "They're destroying all our wild life."

"Maybe," the other man said. "But you got a lesson to learn, Banning. I know this cow lying here, dead, belly ripped wide and bloody, doesn't seem right. But it's something the Park Service has only learned in late years. I guess maybe you could call it the queer law!"

"I don't get it," the young ranger said.

"Survival of the fittest," the other explained. "For years we used to trap all the timber wolves and cats in these parts. Then a funny thing happened. Sure, the elk and deer herds increased, temporarily, but something else took its course. Nature! Whereas the wolves and lions used to ferret out the weak, the sick and the unfit, now they stayed with the herds and disease cut the numbers down more than the predators."

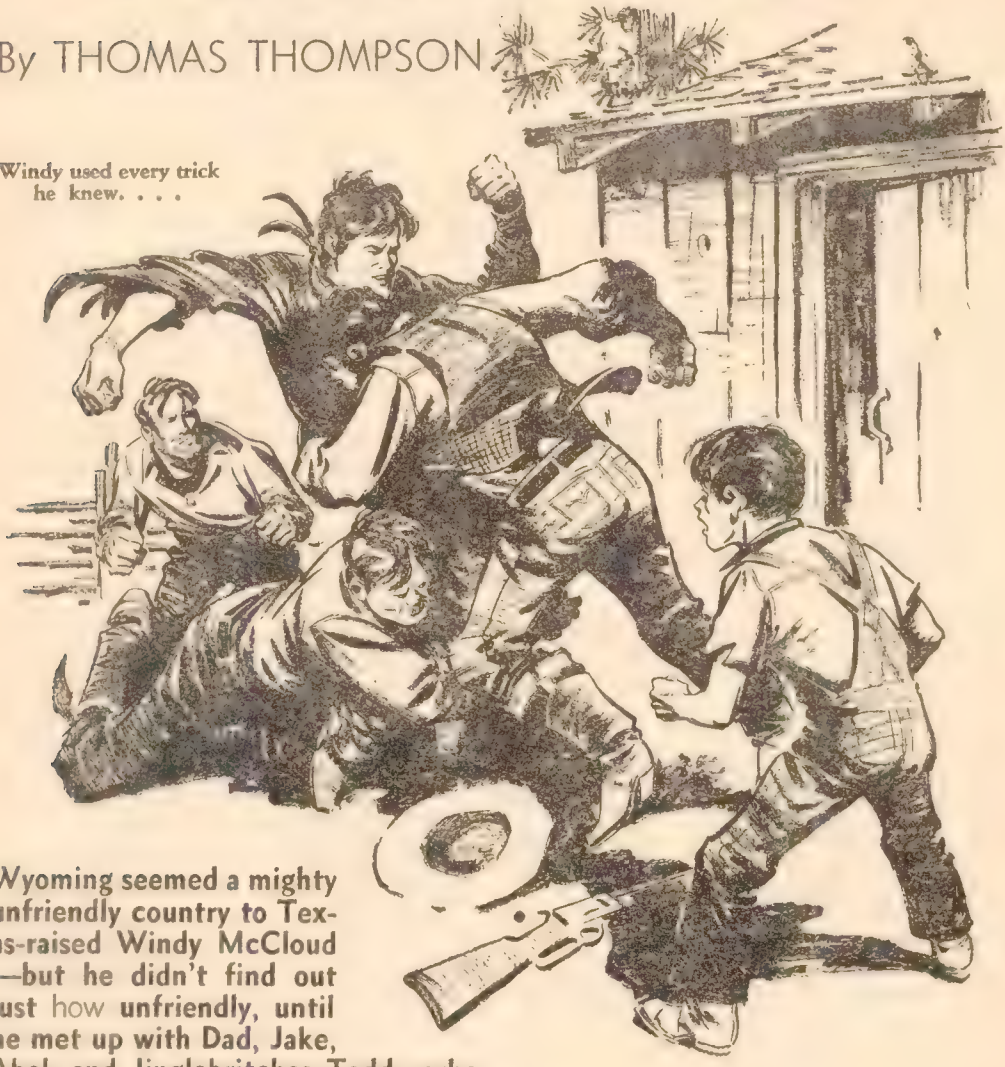
"So that's why we don't kill all the timber wolves and cats any more!"

"Right," the older ranger replied, lighting a cigarette. "We just keep them down a bit—help Nature keep her own balance."

High up on the side of the mountain on a small ledge, Crooked-Foot basked lazily in the sun. Behind him in the den he had but lately found, a sleek, tawny she watched him alertly. And if Crooked-Foot missed his other mate, he seemed not to mind. He was living life as he saw it, as nature had intended it. The law of the survival of the fittest!

TEXANS, KEEP OUT!

By THOMAS THOMPSON



Windy used every trick he knew. . . .

Wyoming seemed a mighty unfriendly country to Texas-raised Windy McCloud—but he didn't find out just how unfriendly, until he met up with Dad, Jake, Abel, and Jinglebritches Todd—who worked on the idea that any Texican was one step lower than a one-eyed rattlesnake!

HIS NAME was McCloud, and down along the Pecos they called him Windy. Some said it was because he liked to talk a lot—and some said it was because you could never tell which way he'd blow next.

But this wasn't the Pecos. This was Wyoming, and Windy McCloud was riding alone, doing nothing more than looking at the scenery. It was a big change from Texas—even a change from Cheyenne where Windy had made one of his unpredictable "blows" and said goodbye to his old outfit after bringing a herd of stockers up the Goodnight-Loving Trail.

Windy hadn't seen anyone for a long spell and he had about come to the conclusion that this high plain-and-foothill country with its towering sentinel mountains was a lonesome place, when a high-pitched voice commanded him to "Whoa-up!"

Windy pulled up sharp, and gazed down the barrel of a very old eight-square Hawkins rifle held by a ragged kid of not more than twelve.

"Well I'll be derned," Windy whistled. "Outlaws come mighty small in these parts!"

"Don't give me no talk, stranger," the kid said, raising the rifle. "Get down offen that horse."

"Now hold on, Jinglebritches," Windy said, grinning. "This horse of mine and me are plumb good pals. I don't cotton to parting company with him. You see, this horse and me—"

"I ain't got time to hear about you or your horse," the kid said. "Pile down!"

Windy rode closer, and the rifle came up to meet him. From where he sat Windy could look a long way down the barrel. He reached down and gently pushed the gun aside. The kid's face was pale and Windy could see now his hands were trembling.

"Look, Jinglebritches," Windy said. "Why don't you put that thing down before you tire yourself out? If this is a holdup, maybe I can loan you a dollar or two."

"This ain't no holdup," the kid said. "We Todds don't have to steal. But I know who you are and you ain't coming through here. You're going back the way you come —only you're going on foot!"

"You sure make big talk for such a little shaver," Windy said, rolling a cigarette.

"You quit that talk and get down," the kid demanded, his voice getting desperate. Windy applied a match to the cigarette and hooked a leg around the saddle horn. The kid put down the gun disgustedly and began to cuss.

"Now hold on here," Windy said, swinging down. He started to lay his hand on the kid's shoulder, but the youngster jerked away and snarled like an animal.

"Keep your filthy Texas paws offen me," he screamed. "You blasted killer!"

Windy looked at the kid a long time. "Doggone it, Jinglebritches," he said, "you sure got my address pegged right—but my occupation— Sure you ain't got me mixed up with some other gent?"

"All Texans is killers," the kid said viciously. "Every dern one of 'em. It was Texans drove off our stock and it was Texans that kilt Uncle Charley." His rage mounted with his words and he leveled the gun again. Windy carefully took the heavy rifle from the kid's hands and leaned it against a tree.

"Now see here," Windy said in hurt tones. "I'm mighty proud to be from Texas and it don't sound very hospitable to hear you talk like that. The War was over before you was ever born. Howcome you're so dead set against Texans? Why, Texans—"

"You gimme my gun and get ridin'," the kid said, wiping his nose on his shirt sleeve. "You're mighty lucky I didn't shoot you when you was coming up the trail. I would of, only we Todds don't fight like that. I'm warning you, though, get off this range."

WINDY got on his horse, but not until he had leisurely hooked a stirrup over the saddle horn and taken a notch in the cinch. Then he sat there, scratching his blond head and looking quizzically at the kid.

"You know, Jinglebritches," Windy said, "my curiosity is getting the best of me. The more I think about the way you talked about my home country the more it hurts me. I've just about decided I ought to have a talk with your dad and get him straightened out on the finer side of good Texas cowboys. Whereabouts you live?"

The question seemed to set off a spark in the mountain kid. He swung the rifle and let out another string of man-sized words. "I'm tired of raggin' with you!" he said. "Get back to the Triple X where you belong, you blasted back-stabbin' Texas skunk!"

Windy McCloud clicked his tongue against his teeth. "That does it," he said sadly, shaking his head. "Now I know I just got to see your dad and get you and him straightened out. Up with you, Jinglebritches!" He put spurs to the cow-pony and, leaning down, caught the kid in the loop of his arm. The kid squirmed, squealed and kicked and the pony pitched, but Windy held on and in a second the pony was racing along the trail and the kid was in the roomy saddle, still hanging onto his gun.

"Now," Windy growled into the kid's ear. "You show me where we're going or I'll make me a mess of Texas stew, the prime ingredient of which is small boy—the tougher the better!" Windy grinned in

spite of himself when he saw that there was not the slightest shade of fear on the kid's face.

"Sure, I'll show you," the kid yelled. He snatched a rein and jerked hard. The tough little cow-pony spun around and headed up a trail into the foothills. "I'll show you, all right," the kid said. "And there'll be one less gun-slingin' Texan in Johnson County!"

For a second anger swept Windy, but then his curiosity got the better of him. Such violent hatred for Texans was something he hadn't seen since he was on his first trail-drive into Abilene. This kid sounded like an old-time Jayhawker. So he let the pony follow the rocky trail into the broad meadow that held a nondescript cluster of buildings at its far end. The kid started yelling before they ever got near the houses.

"Dad—Jake—Abel!" he called. "Get your guns handy! I got you a live Texan." The eager sincerity in the kid's voice startled Windy. Maybe it wasn't such a smart idea riding up this way after all. He eyed the three armed men that had come out the door of the nearest shack.

"What's going on?" a broad-shouldered gent with a deep voice asked, levering a shell into his Winchester.

"He's a Triple X man, and he made me bring him here!" the kid screamed.

The rifle came up and the big man spat before he spoke. "Get down," he said, and this time Windy knew better than to try and push the gun-barrel aside. This was one of those spots where some good fast talking might come in handy.

"Now hold on, stranger," Windy said. "I come here plumb peaceful—just looking at the scenery. I don't know nothing about this Triple X outfit that Jinglebritches here keeps talking about, but from the looks of things I see where I could learn to be mighty unfriendly with that outfit if needs be. Now I ain't up to no harm—" He saw the big man lower the gun and he rushed to take up the slack in his advantage. "Only reason I rode by was to water and feed my horse and maybe have a cup of good coffee if I was asked."

"Where you from?" the big man asked. The other two men pressed forward as if a lot hinged on the answer to that question.

"Why I'm from Texas," Windy said. "And that was another thing—" He hardly felt the impact of the big man's fist against his chin, the blow was so hard. Rather he felt a stunned whirling numbness that ran up and down his arms and finally rumbled down his legs and exploded out the end of each toe. When that happened Windy McCloud realized that he was sitting down, rubbing his chin, and that he was at least ten feet from the three scowling men and the gloating kid.

"We don't like Texans," the big man said.

WINDY felt the rest of his face and discovered that it was all there.

"I sort of gathered that you didn't like Texans," he said.

"Go on over to the Triple X," one of the men said. "There's plenty of your breed there."

"You know," Windy said, still rubbing his chin, "I'm starting to get out of patience with you folks. Now this fist-fighting, for example. Us Texans never did believe in that sort of thing until old Beaver River Smith started showing the boys around up in Abilene. Then we kinda had to learn . . ." He got to his feet and walked slowly up to the three men. Three rifles came up to meet him.

"I still say I came here friendly," Windy went on. "But—"

He grabbed an extended rifle-barrel and tugged hard, pulling the big fellow off his feet. From the corner of his eye he saw the other two rushing in and he leaned over quick, butting his head into the big man's stomach. He hardly had time to hear the "Oof!" before he felt a man on his back. Reaching back with both hands, he grabbed a handful of hair and straightened his back. His attacker went sailing over his head and lit with a thud six feet away.

"Get 'im, Jake, get 'im," he heard the big man yell between gasps for breath, and the red-headed Jake came boring in. Windy caught the first blow on his shoulder and jabbed an elbow into Jake's midriff. The redhead was not soft. He straightened up and swung hard. The blow unseated Windy for a second and in that time the big man dove for Windy's legs. The three men went down in a pile, and from the weight on his chest Windy knew that one more had joined the fight.

Windy started unlimbering like a snake. He used every trick he had ever learned, and he had had opportunity to learn lots of them. Soon he had a head under each arm and was squeezing hard. He kicked with both feet and sent a man sprawling. Then, snapping like a jackknife, he got to his feet and started pounding the two heads together. When the men became limp, he dropped them and uncorked a right on the chin of the big man who was rushing in like a mad bull. The big man never stopped. He raced right on by as Windy stepped aside. Windy gave him one behind the ear as he went by and the big fellow fell like a leg-roped steer. Out of the tail of his eye Windy saw the kid rush for a rifle. Windy stepped over and took the gun out of reach.

"Dern it, Jinglebritches," he said, "I'm getting sick of taking guns away from you!"

The big man was stirring, rubbing his chin. "Never mind, son," he said now. "He won fair and square. That's all we ask."

"But Dad," the kid objected. "How you know he won't shoot you in the back?"

"A man that fights like that don't need to shoot people in the back," the kid's father said. The man got to his feet and walked over toward Windy.

"All right, Texan," he said, "you win for now. Ain't no man ever whipped the Todds like that before. Regardless of what the Triple X says about us and our neighbors, we don't shoot men in the back. Ride on and we won't bother you. But don't come back. You ain't welcome!"

"If this ain't the dog-gondest country I ever did see," Windy said disgustedly. "I'm headin' back all right—but not to the Triple X, which place I never heard of until I met up with you-all. I'm goin' back to Texas."

"Good idea," old man Todd said. "I'd hate to see a young fellow like you get all filled up with buckshot."

Windy mounted and rode down the trail, leaving the Todds still rubbing their chins.

THE trail forked down near where he had first met Jinglebritches, and Windy took the upper fork. It led through one of the prettiest valleys he had ever seen and he almost forgot his strange experience in his admiration for the fertile country. He splashed across a small creek and followed a road leading through the timber. Suddenly his way was barred by a huge gate, and over the gate on a wide board were burned three big X's. In back of the gate, sitting high on a knoll, was the biggest house he had ever seen. Standing on the porch was a man dressed like a dude. He was giving orders to twelve lean, tough-looking riders.

Windy whistled in wonder at the richness of the layout. Reaching down from his saddle, he unlatched the gate and rode up the lane. The riders watched him approach.

"I'm Milton Gregory," the man on the porch said bruskly. "I suppose you're looking for me?" The man's voice was soft and cultured, and yet the arrogance in it made his words seem like a challenge. The twelve riders ringed around Windy, silent and unfriendly.

"Name's McCloud," Windy said. "I'm just an old Texas boy seeing the sights." He sensed the tenseness leave the riders as if he had spoken a prearranged password.

"Oh yes," Gregory said, impatiently. "The job pays a hundred a month. You'll be furnished guns and ammunition. Jeff Taggart there is my foreman."

Windy looked at Jeff Taggart, and there was no doubt in his mind as to the nature of the job that would pay a hundred a month. Taggart was a lean, hungry individual with bony hands that seemed formed

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to hold a gun. Windy grinned and looked at Gregory.

"I wasn't looking for a job," he said.

"Nonsense!" Milton Gregory said. "Only the Triple X hires Texans. If you've been here a day you know that. Either you work for me or you don't work."

Windy didn't like the smug insolence of this man, and he liked even less the breed of riders that he saw here. So these were the men that posed as Texans! He let his eye roam over them and then spat at the toe of his boot. Maybe they had ridden through Texas once. If they had, they had been riding fast.

"Guess I won't work then," Windy said. "I just wanted to see the place, anyway."

Jeff Taggart rode his horse close. "Listen, McCloud," he said, "if that's your name. We don't like saddle-tramps to come snoopin' around on private property. State your business."

"My business ain't your business," Windy said lightly. He had looped his reins around the saddle horn and his hands were at his side. He had only to look into Taggart's eyes to know what the next move would be. It was so easy it almost took the fun out of it. Taggart's hand didn't touch his gun before Windy had him covered. There was amazed, hurt anger in Taggart's eyes and Windy knew that he had made an enemy. Milton Gregory stared in unashamed admiration.

"That was fast, McCloud," Gregory said. "Mighty fast. I forgot to mention that my foreman gets two hundred a month."

THEN Windy McCloud made one of those moves that made men in Texas wonder how he kept alive. He got a silly twisted grin on his face and proceeded to make a speech to Milton Gregory.

"I don't like your money," Windy said in his best speech-making manner. "Not two hundred a month or four hundred a month. I can see what kind of a spread you run just from looking around. I've heard about your breed. Spend your time laying around the Cheyenne Club pretending you don't know what's going on, while your hired gunslicks drive out the little ranchers so you can have more range for your stock. Probably sit pretty high up at the State House, too. The country is getting too full of your kind. I'd rather string along with the forty-and-found crew. Their money ain't got blood on it."

Why Windy made speeches like that, he never knew. It was just something he couldn't control, and he knew before he was halfway through with this one that he had a fight on his hands. As he finished talking he wheeled his horse and buffaloed Taggart across the side of the head with his gun-barrel.

Windy saw Gregory going for a gun and he placed a bullet between the rancher's feet. Gigging his horse, he rode through the center of the cursing riders and emptied his guns as he made for the gate. Out of the welter of milling horses, shots began to sound and lead sang around his ears. The pony banged into the gate and it sagged open with a screech. Windy McCloud rode hard, damning the curse that made him talk so much.

Windy was a good distance from the Triple X before he reined up in a thicket and reloaded his guns. He listened intently for a minute and was surprised when he did not hear the sound of Gregory's riders. Sensing a trick, he got down and took stock of his surroundings.

He stepped cautiously out of the shelter of the brush, and saw that he was on a ridge between the long Triple X valley and the little meadow that held the Todd ranch. Far across the meadow he could see the cluster of Todd shacks hovered together with a bewildered, deserted look about them. As he watched he saw a dozen riders come down the meadow from the foothills beyond.

At first he thought they were Gregory's men, then he realized that they must be mountain ranchers, to come from that direction. Gregory's Triple X riders couldn't have gotten that far in so short a time. He could see that the men were all armed with rifles and they rode straight to Todd's place. The three Todd brothers came from one of the shacks and hailed the riders. There was some sort of conference going on.

WINDY crawled out on a rock ledge higher up and studied the layout of the Triple X. Then he saw why the riders hadn't bothered to follow him. From a dozen different spots, men were crawling slowly toward the top of the ridge. They were picking good vantage spots and then stop-

ping—holing in with rifles ready. It looked very much to Windy like somebody was going to be drygulched, and he figured that somebody would be himself.

He knew he couldn't ride back the way he came—that would be right into the center of the Triple X. One side of the ridge was blocked off by the bushwhackers and the other side sloped down onto the Todd property. Windy thought of that armed bunch of mountain men he had seen, and decided that that would be almost as unhealthy a road as the other. His best way out would be straight up the ridge. He didn't know where that would lead, but at least it wasn't blocked off by men..

He went back and got his horse and started to ride, when a movement in the valley down toward the Todd place caught his eye. The armed mountain men, with the three Todd brothers in the lead, were headed across the big meadow straight for this ridge. They rode in two columns, with old man Todd in the lead. Their rifles were in their saddle scabbards, and they rode like men on a serious but peaceful mission. Suddenly the truth of the situation struck Windy. Those drygulchers there on the other side of the ridge— They weren't laying for Windy—they were waiting for that column of small ranchers coming up the slope! The ranchers were probably coming to make talk with Milton Gregory. Windy whistled. Unless he could warn Todd, the ranchers would be wiped out the minute they topped the ridge.

Every second he waited, the ranchers moved closer to the trap. To ride down the slope, shouting for these men to go back, would be suicide. They would think it was a Triple X trick and some hothead would make a sieve of him. Then on the other hand, riding into that nest of hired killers on the other side of the ridge would be even more sudden death. The only thing Windy could think of was to make a run up the ridge, then swing down in a flanking movement and raise such a hullabaloo that the ambushers would betray their location. Accordingly, he sank spurs and rode up the ridge directly between the two warring factions. But he didn't ride far. Barring his way, sitting their horses with drawn guns, were Milton Gregory and Jeff Taggart, set where they could get a good view of the massacre about to take place. Taggart's gun was level with Windy's chest.

"Keep damn quiet, hombre," Jeff Taggart said. "I been waitin' for you!"

A STRANGE feeling ran through Windy McCloud. He had had that feeling once before when death was almighty close. He felt a great calm and an inner voice seemed to be telling him that as long as he was going to die anyway he might as well do those small ranchers a good turn.

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THE RANGE THAT GOD FORGOT!

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Taggart's and Gregory's guns, he calmly drew his own weapons and started firing. He knew he was hit, but he had the feeling that he had never shot with more accuracy when he saw Taggart slide off his horse. Gregory had turned and was riding like mad, firing harmlessly back over his shoulder.

At the first sound of the shots, all hell broke loose on the Triple X side of the ridge. The drygulchers, taking the shooting for the start of the battle, opened up at anything that moved. Windy heard Gregory screaming wildly, and then saw him topple from his horse, caught in his own cross-fire.

The Triple X gunmen saw their mistake now and every rifle turned in Windy McCloud's direction. Windy dove into a pile of rocks and reloaded his smoking guns. Poking his head up, he noticed a movement down the slope from him and let go with one gun. He saw a man sprawl out behind a bush, and he knew that he had one less rifle to worry about.

It had been a good shot, but it had given away his position. It sounded like a hundred rifles going all at once, and lead poured into his rock shelter so fast that he felt the rocks would be torn away. He answered the fire as best he could, but to get a shot in was next to impossible.

He did get in one or two, and the last time he raised his head he saw the Triple X men were closing in on him. He felt a bullet fan his shirt-sleeve and realized that one man had gotten in behind him some way and could shoot down into his enclosure. Windy snapped a shot over his shoulder, but the answering slug from the hidden rifle ripped savagely through his arm. He dropped one gun and started to cuss.

"I'm plumb sick of this country," he said aloud. Then, throwing all caution to the winds, he stood up and started pouring a stream of death into the rocks and brush with his one good hand.

The roar of the rifles was so loud and the whine of lead so close and thick that he didn't know whether he was being hit or not until something seemed to smash him on top of the head, and he fell.

As he hung there, grasping the rock for support, he saw Todd's men ride over the crest of the hill yelling and shooting like a bunch of Comanches.

WINDY never did pass out completely, but once he thought he saw old man Todd on a horse twenty feet high, and another time he was sure he saw seven hundred and fifty green and red rifles all pointed at his head.

But by the time the shooting stopped and the three Todds had gathered around him, things were pretty clear.

"Danged if you ain't the derndest one to start one-man wars," the elder Todd was saying. "I never seen the likes of you!"

Things went a little woozy then. He remembered being supported by strong arms, but he was a little surprised when he found himself propped up under a pine tree with the red-headed Jake Todd bathing his face with a wet bandana. All the ranchers who had ridden with the Todds were standing around. One of them stepped forward.

"We jest want you to know we realize you saved our lives," the speaker said. "We're mighty obleeged to you."

Somehow Windy had the feeling that that was the most talk this man had ever made in his life.

It was then that he saw Jinglebritches. The kid seemed like an old friend here among these strangers.

"Come here, Jinglebritches," Windy said. "I want to ask you one thing. Do you really believe that all Texans are no good?"

The kid looked at him a long time before answering. Then he said, "I don't know. I guess Texans is like that string of buckskins we got. They're all onery, no-good devils—except once in a great while. Once in a while you get one you can handle. I guess Texans is like that."

"Well I'll be damned," Windy said. He stared around the circle in speechless anger, until one of the ranchers started laughing, and the others took it up. Finally Windy grinned himself.

"Shucks," old man Todd said at last, "we know we been wrong about Texans, only Jinglebritches, as you call him, is too dang stubborn to admit it."

Windy grinned even wider. "Now that," he said, "calls for a speech. Friends, cowhands, and countrymen. . ."

Bigger Than Paul Bunyan!

By C. W. CHAMBERLAIN

The loggers have their Bunyan, the flat-boat men their Mike Fink, the Mississippi River men their John Henry—but barrel-chested, hell-roaring, man-for-breakfast Matty Kiely, the hard-rock miners swear, was higher, wider, tougher and louder than all of them put together!

HE REFUSED to fight unless they ganged up on him, and anything less than four burly antagonists were brushed aside with a grin. He much preferred to take on a dozen, did Matty Kiely. There was a *man!*

Arguments are frequent when the rugged miners and other Westerners of various backgrounds get together, with each nationality claiming kinship with Matty Kiely, but the Irish usually have the last word, as usual. The Northwest lumber camps still add to the legends of Paul Bunyan, "who was eighteen inches between the eyes and used a pine tree for a toothpick," but he is outrivaled by the giant mucker who used to sing:

I've been hired and fired tin thousand times,
'Twas Matty Kiely who dug the mines—

That he was hired and fired by more mine foremen than any other mucker is unquestioned. His sense of humor, his ready wit, his colorful personality, his herculean strength, and his amazing strategy in avoiding exertion of that gigantic, muscular power got Matty Kiely in and out of more scrapes than can be recorded.

The lusty giant made other men look like midgets and, when he wanted to, he could do the work of a mine mule, pulling six loaded ore cars for a mile or more. If a car, with its load of a ton of muck, went off the track, Matty would stoop down, and, with one heave of his prodigious shoulders, lift it back on the rails.

When heavier mine timbers were loaded, Matty would load them—if he was in the mood. Or, if a five-ton mine motor needed moving, Matty was the boy called upon to transport it to its proper place. He believed in conserving his monstrous strength on ordinary jobs, such as shoveling with a "muck stick."

They will tell you of the day when he stopped a runaway ore train on a mountain grade by grabbing hold of the last car and dragging his feet on the ties. After which he sued the company for a new pair of brogans!

Then there was the time he was shoveling muck into a chute and decided to delay the men below so that he might cool off and take a smoke. He found a huge mine timber and tossed it down the chute, knowing the crew would be unable to budge it.

The shift boss had had all his teeth extracted the day before and was in no mood for Matty's gargantuan horseplay. When he found that the timber couldn't be moved, he shouted wrathfully up to the giant: "What's the damned fool idea and how in hell do you think we're going to get this timber out of the chute?"

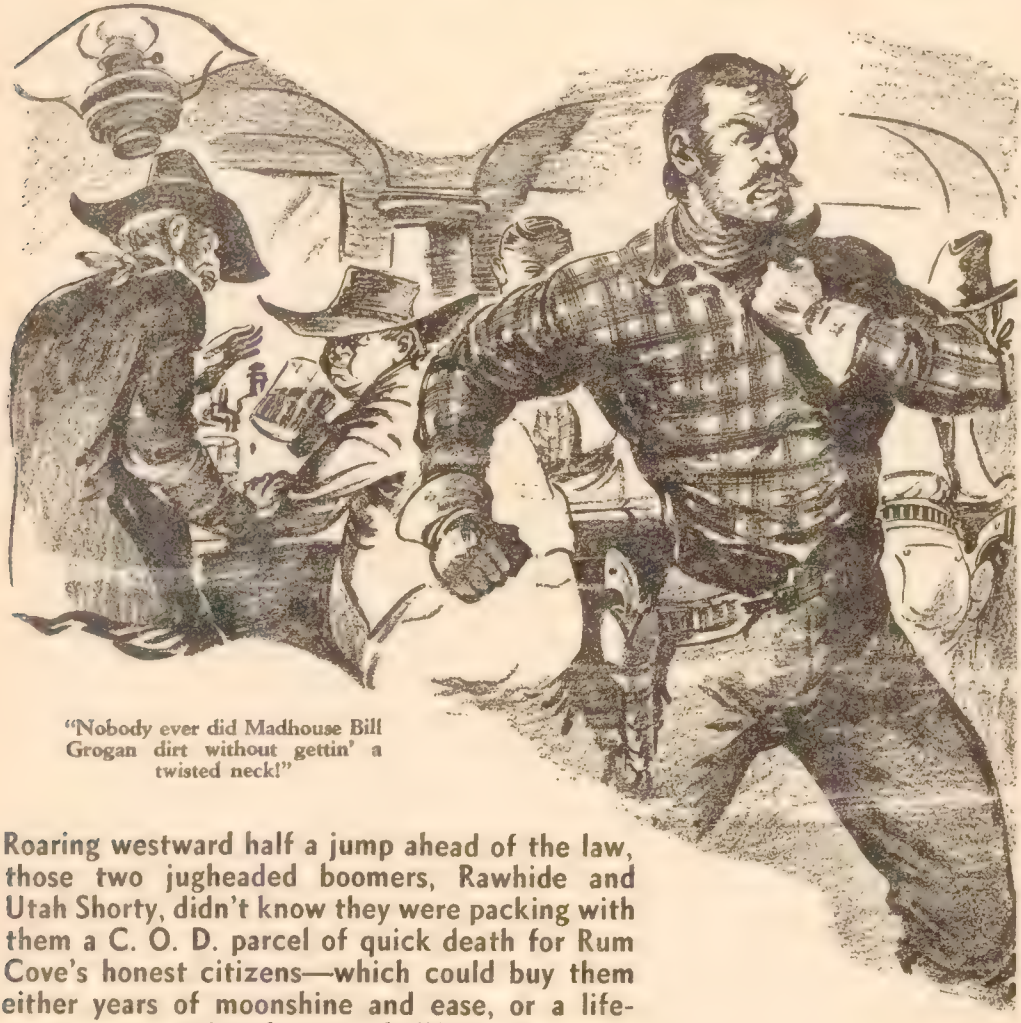
Matty knocked the dottle from his pipe and his voice roared back:

"Pull it out with your teeth, you double-damned spalpeen!"

Then he took his three lunch pails and went looking for a new job.

The frontiersmen as well as the miners, from Butte to San Francisco, idolized Matty Kiely, but he was a chronic headache to whatever boss employed him. Irrepressible, florid-faced, homely but with a perpetual grin, the giant has become the one universal legend of the mining camps. He lived to a ripe old age and died in Butte, where the tales of his prowess and misadventures grow with the years and the imagination of the Westerners.

RAWHIDE McGONIGLE'S



"Nobody ever did Madhouse Bill Grogan dirt without gettin' a twisted neck!"

Roaring westward half a jump ahead of the law, those two jugheaded boomers, Rawhide and Utah Shorty, didn't know they were packing with them a C. O. D. parcel of quick death for Rum Cove's honest citizens—which could buy them either years of moonshine and ease, or a lifetime lease on hell!

CHAPTER ONE

Desperate Journey

THE strident thump of ill-fitted bearings and the boom of goaded combustion chambers preceded a battered yellow pickup truck over the crest of Sugar Loaf. Rawhide McGonigle's boot shuttled convulsively between a floor-boarded accelerator and a useless brake, as they rounded the first of a series of hairpin turns.

For the space of five seconds, before the road turned full north, Rawhide's sagging countenance was wrinkled against the glare of a million diamonds struck by a low-hanging September sun, out on the Pacific. Just two turns behind, the same sun lighted up a hurtling police car with a crumpled fender and a banshee-wailing siren.

Utah Shorty Parcher turned his onion-shaped head against the rusty foam spewing back from a topless radiator. He steadied his hammered-down body with a two-handed death-grip on the door. "I knowed," he yelped, "the minute you plowed into that

GUNPOWDER BONANZA

By ROY M. O'MARA

Thrilling Frontier Novelette

parked car back there, that it'd belong to a sheriff or somebody!"

Rawhide regarded a wind-flopped front ender morosely. "You suppose," he queried, "that lawmen in this state has been tipped off about us? Why, even them eager deputies back in the Carson City country wouldn't get red-eyed and hell-roarin' over such a triflin' thing as a mashed fender!"

"Even if they ain't heard," Utah Shorty quavered, "we ain't got a muffler, no brakes, no driver's license. The last car license we bought was in Montana three years ago—

and besides, there's nothin' legal about drivin' a hunderd and ten miles a hour!"

The two were dressed in floppy wide-brimmed hats, faded blue shirts and ragged levis—a costume designed for a much different environment, such as that around Carson City. But a dead horse, evaluated at two hundred dollars, had to be buried before they could hope to frequent the happy jungle of that locality again.

During a recent period of inactivity Utah Shorty Parcher had struck up an acquaintance with a personable and very intoxicated sheepherder known as Shag Jack Filly. For several days Rawhide had been making a valiant attempt to regain business losses around a green-topped table down at Uncle Joe's Silvertip Bar and Cardroom. While he labored, Utah Shorty and the semi-paralyzed Shag Jack carried on long and animated conversations about making barrels of money—without working. It gave the poker-harried Rawhide McGonigle some peace of mind, for Utah Shorty, without something to do, was inclined to get violently flip-gaited due to the unrestrained use of strong drink.

SHAG JACK FILLY was astounded to learn, from modest remarks made by his short friend, that the latter was a half-owner of the San Francisco Bridge. Shag Jack, moreover, was no hand to quibble. He insisted on buying with spot folding cash, an interest in Utah Shorty's bridge. Two hundred dollars changed hands.

From then on, it was every man for himself. Rawhide McGonigle confiscated the money, explaining that a new day would see a change in his luck and all monies would be regained with interest. He was sifting the last of the two hundred into a hopeless early-morning pot when Shag Jack Filly appeared, flanked by angry relatives—and cold sober.

Even then, fast talking might have served to get Rawhide and Utah Shorty in the clear. But one of the relatives was a duly commissioned deputy sheriff; another was ably filling the office of district attorney. Rawhide and Utah Shorty were instructed to return the money within ten days or have the whole matter aired before the next grand jury.

The prospect of another spell in the local jail held no terror for either man—older cockroaches in better pokeys from Beaumont to Anaconda knew them by their first names. It was the parting remark of the district attorney that chilled the marrow in their uneasy bones—a remark to the effect that swindles involving two hundred dollars often led to the state penitentiary. The institution had never been described as gentle.

They were considering the matter over a couple of bottles of Uncle Joe's sarsaparilla, when a round-shouldered, slick-haired young man laid a thin elbow near Rawhide's. He spoke from the side of his mouth, as if his throat were sore.

"My name," he intoned, "is Spook Johnny the Chemist. I hear there's a heat on, and youse guys could use a couple hunner' bucks."

Sighting along a bony knee, Rawhide consigned a mouthful of sarsaparilla-flavored fine-cut to a bespattered spittoon behind the brass rail. "Yeah," he replied. "Word gets around fast."

Spook Johnny glanced both ways. "Soup Donovan," he said softly, "is one o' my pals who has several deals lined up over on the Coast. I have some very vital materials that he'll be needin'. Would you consider deliverin' a small package to him on Saturday night—that's tomorrow—at Rum Cove over in Oregon? I'm too busy to do it myself. I'll slip you a fifty and Soup will have another two hunner' for you. Only thing is—you can't do no blabbin' about it."

Rawhide's folded countenance gleamed with hope. "For that money, podner," he breathed, "we'd deliver a comic valentine to Sittin' Bull—but how'll this feller Soup, as you call him, know who he's lookin' for?"

"Soup is in Portland now," Spook Johnny reflected. "I'll call him and tell him to be lookin' for a coupla cowhands wid their shirt-tails hangin' out behin'."

Before the sun was halfway to the zenith, camp duffle had been stowed in the pickup, fifty dollars pressed into Rawhide McGonigle's eager paw, and a furtive young man had nervously deposited a burlapped package in the car seat. "The main thing," he warned as Utah Shorty rocked the vehicle with a crank, "is to do no blabberin', and treat this package like a sack o' eggs!"

"Sure, sure!" Utah Shorty yelled, climbing over the door as the pickup lunged away. "Anything you say!" He grasped the package with stubby, appraising fingers. "Looks

to me," he whispered hoarsely in Rawhide's hairy ear, "like a half-gallon can o' old an' rare alky—must be, at that price!"

Rawhide slapped Utah Shorty's sunburned wrist. "Keep yore durned fool grubhooks off'n that. Mr. Soup Donovan probably has some refined and moneyed customers with a expensive taste. Besides, you annoy me with yore continual yammerin' about somethin' to drink."

"Then you think, too," Utah Shorty inquired, "that it's really gilt-edge drinkin' likker?"

"Hush," Rawhide McGonigle suggested, and devoted his attention to fine-cut tobacco and the business of directing a swaying pickup north-by-west.

THEIR final undoing was in the shape of a mammoth KW diesel and trailer shuffling upgrade toward them, occupying for the moment the heel-caulk position on a horseshoe curve. As the two cars roared toward each other, a startled driver threw a gloved hand upward to shield his face. A thin stream of fine-cut traced a curving pattern in the air as the yellow pickup cleared the truck's wrong side with nightmarish inches to spare. Livid burnt-rubber tracks criss-crossed the highway behind the diesel, and the swaying pickup crashed backward over the grade.

As the battered vehicle bumped downward, the pursuing officer's car tore around the bend, hidden from view on the road above. The canyon filled with the wail of a siren for a moment, and then the car was gone around the next curve.

"I have," Utah Shorty jolted out as the pickup slithered through rocks and brush, "a dyin' confession to make. I—"

The splintered stump of a fir sapling caught under the front axle. The pickup faltered, with dirt and rocks dropping from overhanging rear wheels toward the canyon floor two hundred feet below. Rawhide's black sombrero hung on a nearby limb, but he clutched the burlapped package firmly under a long right arm. There was a glint of triumph in his watery blue eyes.

They turned their heads cautiously in time to see several articles, including Utah Shorty's bedroll, a pick and assorted tools, slide off the tailgate and float toward the treetops below.

"About this confession," Rawhide began, "must be you have another bottle ditched—"

WHOOM!

Startled from sea-cooled centuries of quiet growing, giant firs cast whistling widowmakers into the underbrush around the cowering pair. Still impaled on the splintered sapling, the pickup lurched sideways and the oft-damaged fender tore completely away to roll over the edge, headlight and license plate attached.

Across the gorge a snub-nosed, unattended logging locomotive tipped slowly on its narrow-gauge track as the grade gave way in a patched washout. Clouds of gray dust and screams of rock-gouged metal attended the twisting, rolling progress of the engine.

High-lofted fragments of the canyon floor rattled the undergrowth around the pickup. An egg-sized missile glanced unheeded into Rawhide's open shirt-front, and another found lodging between his hairy neck and a loose collar.

"Gorsh!" he remarked, reaching for his hat, "these local miners really believe in gittin' rid of all their dynamite to once on Saturday night."

Utah Shorty's complexion compared favorably with the mass of huckleberry brush framing his twitching face. "Rawhide," he implored, "le's us forget this mankillin' goose chase and go back to Carson City to face the music. Maybe they've changed their minds by now."

Rawhide McGonigle gingerly hoisted his long legs out of the pickup. "Hush yore silly hawgwash about us abandonin' commitments made in good faith," he advised. "Just busy yore addled self with threadin' that cable through a front spring and up to a tree on the grade. After that, a few humps on this winch handle will sweat them crazy notions outa yore head, an' git us back to terra firma, both at the same time!"

CHAPTER TWO

The Sinister Mr. Soup Donovan

SHADOWS gathered in the canyons and crept toward the gnarled madroñas atop Sugar Loaf before Rawhide McGonigle and Utah Shorty Parcher labored the battered pickup to safety. Aside from the lost fender and multiple new dents, the car was in a state of normal disrepair.

Rawhide tenderly prodded his long mid-

section. "Funny thing," he remarked. "In spite of a worrysome gripe just under m'belt buckle, I'm hungry enough to eat the tail off'n a hoss!"

Utah Shorty's voice was uneasy. "Yeah," he replied, "them miners won't be blastin' down in the canyon any more tonight. We can jungle up here 'longside the road—but look," he added with a note of strained enthusiasm, "le's cobble up somethin' besides flapjacks!"

Rawhide poised the grub box in midair and studied the nervous expression on the face of his partner. "Man and boy," he said, "I've knowed you thirty-odd years. Every day we eats flapjacks, exceptin' on Thanksgivin'—sardines—and on Christmas—biscuits. Now get that egg-suckin' look off'n yore face afore I come at you with a tire-iron!"

Avoiding his partner's piercing eyes, Utah Shorty rustled some wood. "Sow-belly and beans," he agreed weakly, "but not flapjacks. I—"

"Shut up," Rawhide recommended.

Squatted on long legs with his face pulled away from pungent fir smoke, Rawhide long-armed a skittle. With the other hand he groped for the syrup in the grub box. "Where," he asked, "is the sticky lick? I can't find either the big can, or the small bottle."

Utah Shorty turned from the fire, and Rawhide missed the sudden flush on the short man's cherubic features. He said nothing.

"We used some of it on the flapjacks," Rawhide marveled, "when we broke camp on Green Springs Mountain this mornin'. Then I seen you puttin' both the can and bottle in the grub box. Plain as day, I remember."

Utah Shorty uttered a forced, strident laugh. "Truth is," he managed, "I ain't a hand to eat sweet stuff on flapjacks nohow!"

A strip of bacon slid down Rawhide's long gullet without benefit of mastication. "Shorty Parcher," he choked, "I swear I never seen you so downright untruthful and messed up without havin' a booze-sneakin' spree—an' that can't be it 'cause at them times you allus smell like a busted gin barrel in a den of civet cats."

Throughout the meal and until they gave the one-lighted pickup a downgrade boost, Rawhide McGonigle kept a puzzled blue eye on his queer-acting companion.

RUM COVE came on them suddenly, as they rounded a final curve. Off to the left a low-riding lumber schooner was outlined against bobbing lights on a windswept pier. Halfway through the poorly lighted village, Rawhide chose a graveled street leading toward the bluffs and darkness. He turned the car around and parked beside the rocky dead-end roadway. The burlapped package was carefully stowed with their sidearms, under the seat.

"The main thing," Rawhide said as they crunched through the darkness toward sounds of revelry on the short main street, "is to keep that pickup out of sight. That sheriff probable didn't get a good look at us, but he'd know our car in hell."

"Purty lively place," Utah Shorty noted without enthusiasm. "Maybe I'd better snoop around a little—where you goin' to be in say half a hour?"

"Right with you, dehorn," Rawhide clenched out. "Iff'n I ain't mistook, that pig-suckin'-buttermilk expression on yore face means that you'd be too spiffled to hold onto the grass in less time than that. When we get a two-hundred-dollar money order in the mail for Shag Jack Filly you can have a short beer. In the meantime you drink sasperiller with me—and like it. Yo're actin' mighty strange here all of a sudden—not likin' sticky lick on flapjacks an'—"

"Aw, Rawhide," Shorty complained, "things is gettin' too durned complicated. We start off by wranglin' with a sheepherder and his relatives, then right off we get messed up with that slick Spook Johnny the Chemist, smash into a sheriff's car, run our own off'n the road, damn near get blowed up.

"This Soup Donovan is a bootlegger shore, and them fellers is handled by the feds. We'd be better off if we took a jolt for bilkin' ol' Shag Jack and let it go at that."

"Shorty," Rawhide said firmly, "pull down yore hat, turn up yore shirt collar, clamp yore trap and c'mon!"

High heels and wide dusty-brimmed black hats set them apart from the loggers, miners, fishermen, longshoremen and sailors who kept worn batwing doors thumping on the spacious, blue-aired Rusty Bucket. With lowered chins, the strange pair made their

way through the crowd to a vacant beer-splashed spot on a long bar.

There was a double hiss of lifting caps and two bottles thumped the bar before them. A familiar voice said, "I knowed I'd get the money out o' this sasperiller if I saved it long enough!"

"Horseshoe Jake Bailey!" Rawhide greeted. "You was in Cheyenne the last—"

"Sure, sure, but you know where Horseshoe Jake shows up—he goes where the dinero jangles loudest. And here, my dishonest friends, things swing wide and high; and they're goin' higher!"

"What you mean higher?"

Horseshoe Jake leaned across the bar. "See that chesty goat bellied up to that card table over there—that heavy-shouldered bird in the green shirt?"

RAWHIDE and Utah Shorty turned furtive heads. "Yeah," they breathed.

"Besides loggin', fishin', ranchin' and shippin'," the saloonkeeper croaked, "we now have minin'! That big onion over there is none other than Gambleshaft Charley Wetzel—millionaire mine promoter. Has his equipment all over the dock, and fifty thousand bucks dumped in the local bank vault for incidental expenses when the big day comes!"

"Shorely secretive about where he keeps his cash," Rawhide commented. "But what's this you're sayin' about a big day?"

"Chrome!" Horseshoe Jake told him. "They know there's millions o' tons of it around here somewheres—only thing is, they ain't hit the mother lode yet. One o' these lucky miners is goin' to uncover that highgrade and collect that five-thousand-dollar reward Gambleshaft Charley has posted for discovery! From then on—!"

The saloonman frowned at the lack of interest manifest on the stubbled faces before him. "Remember," he said, "stay away from them poker tables—unless you go in as house men." With that he pushed a sodden towel down the bar to where newly-arrived patrons clamored for beer.

"Just one teeny weeny short one?" Utah Shorty whimpered.

"Shhhh!" Rawhide admonished. "Flip yore shirt-tail out, so's Mr. Soup Donovan can recognize us. An' quit actin' like that sasperiller was battery acid—gulp it down, and we'll start millin' around so's Mr. Donovan'll see us quicker."

As the hoisted expanse of Rawhide's shirt-tail dropped to knee level, there was the thud of a falling object which rolled out under the feet of the crowd. "What was that?" he mumbled, probing his pockets. "Thunk for a minute I'd dropped m' jackknife."

The clash of unfaded blue shirt-tails with the sun-bleached, worn uppers made even the hardest booze-fighters gape as the furtive pair mixed with the crowd.

They were near the swinging half-doors when Horseshoe Jake Bailey slammed a fist on the bar, and whooped for silence. Except for the melancholy throbbing of one multi-colored juke over in the corner, the place turned quiet. A stocky, barrel-chested giant in a cruiser coat, stagged levis and plaid wool shirt stalked out away from the bar and took a spread-legged stance in the middle of the floor. Muscles knotted on his square jaw as he studied the crowd.

"I just wanted it known," he boomed out suddenly, "that nobody ever did Madhouse Bill Grogan dirt without gettin' a twisted neck. If I ain't big enough, plenty o' my timber beasts are! When we find out who the powder-happy gravel scratcher was that blew a loggin' locomotive into Honey Crick Canyon today, he's goin' to have me to whip.

"Besides that, Sheriff Pete Cutler is wantin' to square accounts with him—and he already has picked up one damn' good piece of evidence. One way or another,

TARGET—GERMANY! When those bombers go roaring over Berlin and Hamburg, it's your dimes and dollars that speed them on their way. . . . Your money, lent to the United States Government for a return of four dollars on every three you put up! The 5th War Loan is now on. For your country, and for your own future in a better world, buy now!

somebody can figure on gettin' kicked all over hell, an' part o' Canada—if, of course, he can't pungle up a few thousand dollars to recover the engine and repair the track!"

Madhouse Bill Grogan eyed the throng darkly, then walked back to his drink. A fidgety ball racker tripped the jukes with hurried nickels and the place settled down to a degree of strained normalcy.

"YOU know," Utah Shorty whispered, "there's somethin' familiar about the palaver that dude was makin'."

"Yeah," Rawhide agreed, flapping a long shirt-tail, "I knowed, when we was hangin' on the cliff, that them miners was gettin' awful uppity with a Saturday night load—makes for bad blood 'twixt them and the loggers. But that's one deal they can't pin on us. Just keep yore yawp shut and they'll never know we was in fifty miles o' the place."

"Not unless," Utah Shorty suggested, "that piece of evidence this feller was yappin' about, is that fender and license plate we lost over the cliff there."

White showed around Rawhide McGonigle's watery blue eyes as he politely held a tottering crab fisherman away from a brimming cuspidor. "Gorsh!" he chortled. "Gorsh, I—"

"C'mon," Utah Shorty urged. "Let's fergit Soup Donovan and take out o' here like gutshot bats!"

Rawhide dug a sharp elbow in Utah Shorty's well-padded ribs. "Out there on the sidewalk," the tall man hissed. "That big fat distinctive-lookin' feller—I bet that's Mr. Soup Donovan!"

Utah Shorty held back. "I don't know," he faltered. "Somethin' familiar about him—"

"Flap your shirt-tail a little," Rawhide instructed, dragging Utah Shorty through the swinging doors.

They walked slowly past the fat man, hats well over downcast eyes. Utah Shorty lagged a full step behind. "Howdy do, Mr. Soup Donovan," Rawhide muttered from the side of his mouth.

Heavy hands fell on their shoulders and they were viciously whirled about. "What did you say?" the fat man cracked out.

"Par'n us!" Rawhide gulped. "Case o' mistaken identity. We thunk you was a feller named Mr. Soup Donovan."

The heavy man regarded them, up and down, with narrowed eyes and speculative underlip. "Do you jakes know who Soup Donovan is?" he asked. "Or have you just overheard some talk?"

Rawhide McGonigle leaped to recover a bad fumble. He nervously propelled a brown stream over his shoulder, wiped his mouth and pulled a palsied hand across his shirt-tail.

A stiffening nor'wester pressed Rawhide's shirt-tail against an angular posterior. "Jus' gabble," he blurted out. "Me and my li'l podner heard a feller say Mr. Soup Donovan was comin' to town tonight."

The heavy-bodied man hoisted a jacket zipper to his round chin, hunched against the night wind and studied the travel-rumpled pair. "I've been expecting something like this," he said darkly, and moved suddenly away with remarkable agility for a man of his poundage. From the shadows between the block stone bank and the gray courthouse, two men moved diagonally across the street and joined him at the curb. Utah Shorty snapped his fingers.

"I remember now," he breathed, "who that hooligan is—he's the sheriff that was whoopin' us around the mountain this afternoon. Had his buzzer under his jacket."

After two steps backward, Rawhide staggered erect. "Gorsh," he blinked, relaxing suddenly to a seat on the rickety board sidewalk. "That must be Sheriff Pete Cutler that stump-jumpin' Madhouse Bill Grogan was publicizin' in the Rusty Bucket. You suppose he's conspirin' agin' us with them lobos that just crossed the street?"

DOWN where the fat official and two other men huddled, a heavy, late-model sedan aroused from idling torpor, opened sealed-beam eyes and moved slowly from the curb.

"Which one o' you shirt-tail heifer-hazers is Rawhide McGonigle?" a smooth voice intoned as the heavy sedan ducked to a quiet halt before the seated men. They scrambled to their feet.

Utah Shorty backed away with a sickened grin. "Him!" he indicated.

From the back seat came a terse command: "Get in—both o' youse!"

Rawhide grabbed his partner by a too-long shirt-sleeve. "C'mon, meathead!" he hissed. "Quit actin' like you was ketched

in the wrong rest room—this is it! Our troubles are over. This is Mr. Soup Donovan for sure!" Whereupon Utah Shorty Parcher was dragged to the spacious rear seat of the car, occupied by two guitar-cases and a very poised individual with a narrow nose and knife-like creases in his clothing. Utah Shorty braced his stubby carcass in a corner while Rawhide extended a hairy paw to the stranger in the semi-darkness.

"Must be," he said warmly, "that yo're Mr. Soup Donovan?"

One of the three men in the front seat winced, as the car moved ahead. "That's right, droop-face," he said, "but we don't mention it aloud—ever!"

"Shunnup youse boids," Mr. Soup Donovan said smoothly, turning to the eager-eyed Rawhide. "Who was d'fat monkey youse guys made d'chin clatter wit' while we was parked down the street?"

"Truth is," Rawhide hastened to explain, "we ain't right shore—but he's a onfriendly sort."

"Looks to me," the driver threw over his shoulder, "like Spook Johnny is hard up for runners."

"Shunnup," Mr. Donovan recommended again, resting a shining black oxford on a guitar-case. "There's plenty aboun this whole deal that stinks—but for fifty G's we can afford t'travel secon' class an' maybe ride a heat or two."

Rawhide McGonigle nodded wisely. "That," he avowed, "is what I allus say!"

A tremor ran the length of Utah Shorty as the driver turned around and followed directions to the sag-bodied yellow pickup.

CHAPTER THREE

Mystery of the Sticky Lick

WITH the burlapped package tucked firmly under an arm, Rawhide approached the four strangers. Utah Shorty huddled beside the big car. "I understand," Rawhide said, "that there's a matter of two hunderd chips to be considered afore this deal is completed. We'd appreciate the immediate clinchin' of the transaction as we have very pressin' business—"

Soup Donovan was turning a wide lapel against the nor'western breeze. His trouser legs fluttered. "What's d'rush?" he wanted to know. "I won't have any small change until after d'show—in about twenny minutes. Youse can tell we ain't powderin' as long as d' car is here—besides it's a good way t'keep youse guys from gettin' mouthy."

The burlapped package was reluctantly relinquished. The strangers pulled hat-brims sharply down to shield their faces. Two of them carried guitar-cases. "Youse boids have your orders," Soup Donovan purred. "Louie does d' jimmy woik—Joey follows wit' the soap and blankets. Then I come in for d' blow show wit' the soup and fuse. Indiana Slim will be across d' street wit' the Chi piano. Le's go!"

They fanned out, shoes barely audible in the salt grass. "You know, Shorty," Rawhide stated, "them fellers puzzle me. Iff'n they didn't act so goldarned illegal, I'd say they might be musicians—them banjo-cases and the palaver they was makin' about a show. But on the other hand they was yammerin' about soap and soup, blankets and a few somethin' or other—couldn't be they figure on havin' some soup, takin' a nap, puttin' on a show of some kind, and takin' a bath all in twenty minutes. And they ain't got me fooled on this pianer proposition—takes a bigger case for a pianer than they got."

The tall man leaned against the front bumper of the sedan. "What you think, Shorty," he asked. "Maybe them sweet-smellin' dudes is givin' us a chase up Squaw Crick. . . ."

There was no answer. From behind the sedan, in the darkness, came the sound of uncontrolled gagging. Utah Shorty Parcher emerged, dragging his feet, wiping his mouth and sputtering with displeasure.

"Utah Shorty Parcher!" Rawhide growled ominously. "I knowed you had a bottle ditched out—shame on you! What would yore ol' dead gran'maw think of that? Give me a whiff of your breath!"

"Honest, Rawhide!" Utah Shorty sputtered. "I ain't got any likker!"

"Well I'm a son-of-a-gun," Rawhide breathed. "That ain't likker—smells more like a combination of sulphur and assorted garbage. You been workin' on some hair tonic or squirrel poison?"

"No!" Utah Shorty coughed. "I ain't—"

Cupping a match against the wind, Rawhide was gravel-gouging bony knees behind the sedan, fruitlessly searching for a bottle,

when from down near the Rusty Bucket there came one high-pitched, sustained and unearthly yell followed by the ribald, tumultuous vocal efforts of many excited men.

A darting figure came around the corner, on the main stem, and came puffing along toward the transfixed pair huddled between the big sedan and the yellow pickup. He suddenly swerved into the salt flats and began a frenzied pounding on a tar-papered shack nestled in the shadows of the sand dunes.

"Olaf!" the man yelled, "hit the deck—they've found highgrade!"

Through one window a match flared, and then Olaf was framed in the doorway against yellow lamplight, rumpled of blond hair and disposition.

"Whoosit?" he inquired blandly. "Whoosit make tam lucky hit? An' where?"

"Gambleshaft Charley Wetzel hisself!" the breathless informer puffed out. "Found a hunk o' highgrade, the size of a aig, on the floor down at the Rusty Bucket—pure chrome I tell you! Grab your pants an' a pick!"

"Yumpin' tam!" Olaf sputtered. "You're yust a beer-headed yackass!"

"But Olaf!"

"You ban doin' your prospectin' there for tam long time," Olaf yelled angrily, and slammed the door.

AS SUDDENLY as it died at Olaf's front door, the clamor subsided in front of the Rusty Bucket. For the space of a few minutes, an embarrassed silence held the town.

"Durned fools," Rawhide McGonigle remarked, fumbling for a match to continue his search for Utah Shorty's bottle. "All goes to show what spirited likker will do to the public— What was that?"

From the other end of town came the single detonation of a pistol, followed by two more shots. Before the echo died from the bluffs back of the pier and the crags back toward Sugar Loaf there was one sputtering burst of machinegun fire, three scattered shots—then silence again.

Slight crunching of gravel less than twenty feet away was the next sound Rawhide and Utah Shorty heard. Two shadows approached. "All right," the voice of Mr. Soup Donovan rasped softly, "up wit' d' mitts, youse—so youse didn't know d' fat guy, uh?"

With a hard-nosed automatic jammed in either set of ribs, Rawhide and Utah Shorty complied—and quickly. "I tried to tell you—" Shorty started.

"So youse didn't know d' fat guy?" Mr. Donovan repeated. "Well him an' his pals was so thick around that can, youse couldn't see it. Indiana Slim an' Joey were beefed in d' street, an' for dat youse stool-pigeon rats'll burn. An' I'm not mentionin' a fifty-grand fumble!"

"Shall we," breathed Louie, "give 'em the business now?"

"Naw!" Soup Donovan snapped. "These cowsmells has got us lured up a dead end. That fat sheriff an' his goon-gang'd hear d' shootin' an' come runnin'. I got a better idear—gimme your heater an' you hogtie these pigeons in th' back o' their own clunk."

"It was a purty good deal," Louie commented, nervously cutting a few pigging strings from Utah Shorty's prized lariat. "Settin' up here waitin' for th' fun—much of a reward on us?"

"Say somethin'!" Utah Shorty hissed.

"Can't," Rawhide gasped. "M'belly is killin' me!"

Soup Donovan handed the guns to Louie and removed the burlapped package from under one arm. With wrists tied to ankles, Rawhide McGonigle and Utah Shorty Parcher watched the procedure. The package was placed between them on the rough pickup bed.

"As youse know," Mr. Donovan explained, tooth crimping a bright cap at the end of a short fuse, "this is nitroglycerine, made to me exactin' specification by Spook Johnny d' Chemist. Youse will notice that Louie is tyin' d' steerin' wheel on this heap. From long experience I know that there'll be one hell of a explosion about d'time youse gets to d'intersection. In d'excitement we'll haul outa this dead end, an' you filthy rats will go a mile high in small, bloody hunks."

Rawhide found his voice. "Nitroglycerine?" he chirped. "Explosion? Why, that's murder!"

Louie boosted the pickup with a heavy shoulder. "He says," Mr. Soup Donovan remarked, igniting the fuse before the pickup rolled away down the gentle grade, "moider!"

FOR the space of a few seconds raw flame spurted from the fuse. Then there was only the acrid stench of powdersmoke, and a hissing almost inaudible.

"Say somethin', pal," Rawhide McGonigle yammered. "Here we are about to suffer a disgraceful death—and there you sit, all humped up like a monkey lovin' a football!"

Utah Shorty Parcher regarded the approaching intersection with underlip extended in unabashed anxiety. "You don't know it," he sighed, "but we'd be better off if there was an explosion—especially me, who has busted the trust of a pal. I should be blowed up—Shag Jack Filly, Spook Johnny's package, the sheriff, Mr. Donovan, even the blast in the canyon—all my fault."

"No, pard!" Rawhide screeched. "We'll bear equal blame into Purgatory after the explosion!"

"You forgive me?" Utah Shorty sniffled. "You mean you wouldn't do nothin' to me for messin' things up?"

"You know better!" Rawhide choked. "I love ever' bone in yore stinkin' li'l carcass—like a brother!"

"Okay, then," Utah Shorty said. "They ain't goin' to be no explosion. I been meanin' to tell you—"

The hind wheels of the vehicle jerked from the street when the front end plowed into the warm board sidewalk in front of the butcher shop. Rawhide and Utah Shorty tumbled forward.

Sheriff Pete Cutler bounded from the shadows, and scattered cohorts brandishing carbines, pistols and sawed-off heavy-bores, leaped forward. From down by the drugstore across the street a voice yelled, "Hey Pete, is that them damned bank robbers?"

"Don't know!" Sheriff Cutler yelled back. "But we'll durn soon find—"

Whapp!

The yellow pickup bounced on all four frayed tires and rocked crazily. Precipitated by an explosion beneath them, Rawhide McGonigle lurched out of the pickup bed, and Utah Shorty pitched forward over the side in hogtied discomfort. Drenched with dripping crimson, they lay stunned.

"You lied!" Rawhide groaned. "You said there weren't goin' to be a explosion—and here we are in a welter of our own gore!"

Foremost in a flood of patrons pouring through the doors of the Rusty Bucket were Madhouse Bill Grogan and Gambleshaft Charley Wetzel. "Stay back!" Sheriff Cutler yelled from beside the butcher shop. "Them fellers are probably dangerous sabatoors that blowed up Honey Crick Canyon—at any rate they got a missin' fender, and the other one matches the one I picked up. They're barricaded in the back end of the rig with hand grenades or somethin'."

"Hey!" Utah Shorty piped. "Don't—"

"Shhhh," Rawhide contributed through the agony of a stomach-ache and the ordeal of bleeding to death. "Jus' lay back and kick off like a gennleman."

A DEPUTY somewhere near the intersection voiced a hoarse yelp of warning when a long, heavy sedan, without lights, ripped in on the bluff road and turned on two wheels in the intersection.

Whoom!

Plate glass from shattered store windows crashed on the board sidewalk. Atmosphere, ground and buildings moved back two inches. The rear of the racing sedan flew high in the air and the radiator inscribed an erratic, sparkling pattern along the rough-topped street. The sedan doors flew open and from either side the angular figures of two men flew out ignominiously.

"Halp!" whooped the deputy. "Sheriff! It's them damn' bank outlaws!"

"Go get 'em, Sheriff!" Madhouse Bill Grogan bellowed. "We'll rustle some guns and take care o' them sabatoors in the pickup!"

Rawhide McGonigle bestirred himself. With sad eyes surrounded by crimson-clotted whiskers and stiffened hair hanging from under twisted hat, he dully regarded the approach of Madhouse Bill Grogan, Gambleshaft Charley Wetzel, their henchmen and dozens of other interested parties.

"Gorsh!" Rawhide mumbled. "This bleedin' to death is cer'nly a tedious process."

Utah Shorty twisted a bespattered head. "I hate to disrup' your plans," he said, "but you ain't bleedin'—just lick your chops oncet."

The crowd had edged to the middle of the street. Rawhide extended a fearful tongue to a caked underlip.

"Sticky lick!" he croaked. "How—what—?"

Utah Shorty sighed. "Nothin' matters now," he muttered. "I swapped the sticky lick can for Spook Johnny's can this mornin' on Green Springs Mountain. I thunk it was old an' rare alky. I guess it was Spook Johnny's can that slid off into Honey Crick Canyon in my bedroll and blew everythin' up, includin' the locomotive. So it was a can o' sticky lick that Mr. Donovan put in with us, and the cap on the fuse popped and threw sticky lick all over us. But don't forget—you said you loved me like a brother!"

"That," gritted Rawhide McGonigle, "is right—but you'd be s'prised how brothers gets along sometimes. Now just what happened to the sticky lick bottle?"

"I poured the syrup out," Utah Shorty confessed, "and filled it with Spook Johnny's concoction, thinkin' I'd have a little somethin' to nip on. First chance I got was up behind Mr. Soup Donovan's car, just afore you ketched me. It tasted like hell, so I laid it on the bumper—it musta fell off and blew the devil outa things when they broke through the intersection here."

Rolling plaid sleeves high on massive arms, Madhouse Bill pulled a bullet head back after a quick look at the pickup. "Hogtied!" he exclaimed. "Cut 'em loose, one o' you bark-eatin' hook chasers—an' set 'em out where I can get to 'em!"

Utah Shorty was tumbled into the street beside Rawhide McGonigle, whose first act with freed hands was to rub a palsied handful of fine-cut across his face.

Madhouse Bill settled long calks, hoisted stagged jeans, spat in either hamlike fist. "While th' sheriff is busy with them bank robbers," he announced, "I'm goin' t' settle the Grogan Timber Company grudge. Now, if you swamp rats have anythin' to say before I split your skulls like a punk butt—say it out loud!"

Rawhide McGonigle straightened, painfully. "Yas!" he said. "I have a request to make!"

"Spit it out—but none o' your damn' stallin'!"

"I have," orated Rawhide, "a pulsatin' gripe, a little below, around and above my belly button, that I have been intendin' to inspect for some time. By yore leave I'll have a peek. After that I'll feel more like takin' a drubbin' like a gennleman."

Released by sticky, fumbling digits, seat-worn jeans slid the length of spindling legs to expose long-legged red underwear. An irregular object plopped between angled boot-toes. Rawhide McGonigle rolled relief-glazed eyes upward and sighed, "Pour out yore pizen, brother—afore I jus' nacherally float off in the air!"

Grim mouth compressed and red-rimmed eyes intent on an expanse of wrinkled, syrup-smeared jaw, Madhouse Bill Grogan started a graveyarder from his insteps. Utah Shorty Parcher covered his eyes.

Gambleshaft Charley Wetzel uttered a croaking bellow, swung a heavy hobnailed boot sharply to the seat of Madhouse Bill's tight-fitting jeans, and then fell forward at Rawhide McGonigle's feet.

"Highgrade! Like the Rusty Bucket hunk!" Gambleshaft babbled. "Thousands of tons! Millions! Billions! Trillions!"

"Shut up!" Madhouse Bill Grogan roared, giving the big miner a savage push to one side. "Let me at that long drink of stump water!"

Gambleshaft Charley Wetzel's neck strained a green shirt-collar to the breaking point. He squared away with enormous fists revolving. "*Mister* Long Drink of Stump Water to *you!*" he thundered. "This man has been keeping the mother lode secret under his shirt-tail! Now the truth is known! He's rich—already I owe him five thousand dollars, to say nothin' of his claim— Oh, what the hell's the use—a brush-kickin' logger wouldn't understand!"

Madhouse Bill Grogan and Gambleshaft Charley Wetzel were barely warmed up before the sheriff and his crew arrived to quell a riot engulfing that end of town. Rawhide McGonigle and Utah Shorty Parcher shambled to the sidewalk to view the brawl, with manifest respect for coastal methods of fisticuff procedure.

"Your pants," Utah Shorty said. "Yank 'em up. You look silly."

"Yeah," Rawhide McGonigle replied, retrieving the drooping apparel. "I even feel silly." He stepped from the sidewalk.

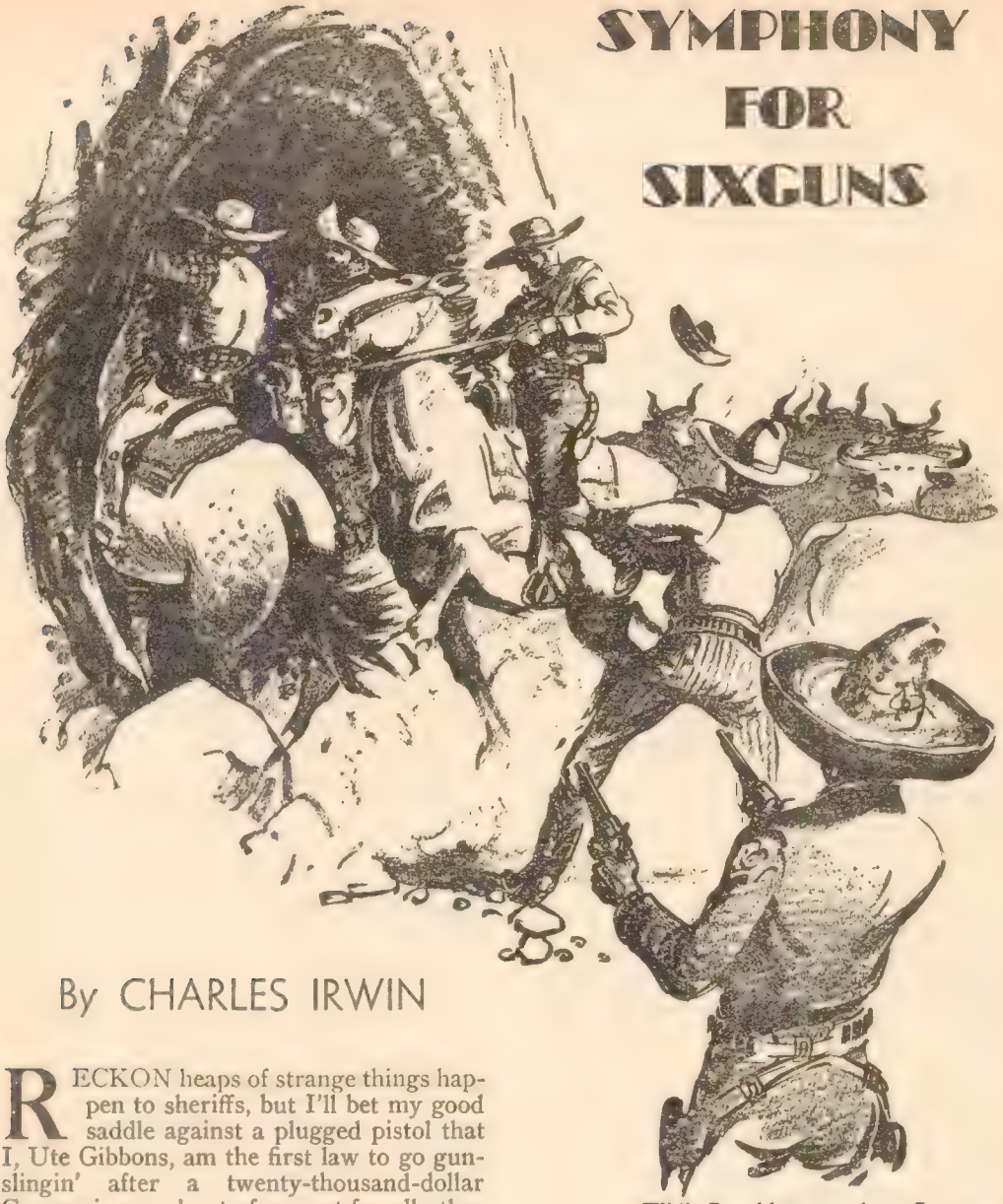
"Hey!" Utah Shorty yelled. "Where you goin'?"

"To the Rusty Bucket," Rawhide replied. "And it ain't for sasperiller!"

An excited logger pointed behind Rawhide. "Hey Slim!" he shouted. "Your pardner just fainted!"

THE END

SYMPHONY FOR SIXGUNS



While Renaldo covered me, I ran out an' grabbed Harris.

By CHARLES IRWIN

When that king's-ransom fiddle disappeared, it was only natural folks should blame Bland Harris, who cottoned to everything around Whiffletree that wasn't nailed down . . . And even though Harris was innocent, that prize instrument fiddled him straight to a solo stretch behind bars!

RECKON heaps of strange things happen to sheriffs, but I'll bet my good saddle against a plugged pistol that I, Ute Gibbons, am the first law to go gunslingin' after a twenty-thousand-dollar Guarnerius—an' out of respect for all other badge-toters, I hope I'm the last!

The festivity which had for days been brewin' in Whiffletree started boilin' over about eight o'clock Saturday night. Renaldo, the little Mexican who'd appointed himself my deputy, was smokin' my cigars chain-fashion whilst sprawled in my swivel chair, one boot propped up on the desk. I stood by the window, uncomfortable in my new store suit, an' watched the street fill with humanity from all the outlyin' spreads.

Men was back-slappin' old pards they hadn't seen for a long time; the women chattered; an' hollerin' kids played tag in an' out of the stores. Now an' then that rascally little Billy Custer would explode a firecracker smack under some unsuspectin' party's feet. Everyone nearby would jump, then guffaw as the button ran away gigglin'.

That afternoon Julie Webb an' I had decorated the schoolhouse inside with pine needles, moss an' fancy crepe-paper. We lined chairs around the walls, an' whilst Julie sprinkled the floor with chipped soap so it'd get sleek, I nailed some boxes together an' made a stage for the orchestra. Finishin', we stood back to admire the job.

"What do you think," Julie asked, linkin' her arm in mine, "folks will say when Parson Sutter announces our engagement at the dance tonight, Eugene?"

Any man who calls me by my right name will get a bust in the snoot, but from Julie it sounds like music. I can't figger what Julie ever saw in me. I am six foot two of nothin' but rawbone an' saddle-leather. My eyes look like faded blue denim, an' my hair is a batch of straw that won't stay put. My hands ain't good for much except to handle a pair of .45's, an' like my feet, they're too big.

Julie is fine an' pretty as they come—clean to the core. Every man, woman, an' school kid around Whiffletree thinks the world of her, an' I am the lucky gent who will land her for keeps. Julie's hair's like shiny coal, an' her brown eyes an' rosy skin are somethin' to make a man's pulse skip.

I DIDN'T tell her I knew blamed well what would happen when the parson finished his speech. Folks were goin' to say, Sheriff Ute Gibbons has a lot of guts to go around courtin' what with the Bland Harris mob still ridin'.

Plenty of folks came that night. The ones not in for the big spring dance I could count twice around on my fingers. Each spread had a skeleton crew patrolin' the grazes an' watchin' for Harris an' his rustlers. I know them riders was plenty sore at me, 'cause if Harris hadn't already outslicked me about six times too many they'd be at the dance same as other folks.

Folks over at the Rae house wouldn't be at the shindig, either. Old Rae an' his missus was tossin' a party, figgerin' a community dance too low for their style. The guest of honor was some celebrity from the East. A fiddle player, as I remembered.

Roscoe Rae owned the big Double R spread. Its boundary started ten miles south of town, an' stretched for Jupiter knows how far up in the New Mexico hills. Mrs. Rae's social aims grew with Roscoe's bank account. They took to travelin' East every year, an' built a big showplace on the north skirt of Whiffletree an' moved in from the Double R. They sure like to make an impression.

But everyone else who could stand on two feet would be at the dance—that is, everyone but Renaldo. My deputy's idea of fun was dodgin' owlhoot slugs whilst blazin' back with his own hogleg. Renaldo had studied to be a priest but suddenly decided *talkin'* outlaws into bein' peaceable wasn't lastin' enough. He came to the American side, an' together we purged my district of every owlhoot mob. Renaldo asked no wages, but I kept him in wine an' tortillas out of my own pocket.

Things got so peaceable I was scared he was goin' to ride out on me. Then Bland Harris, backed by a dozen hardcase gunslicks, rode in from Arizona. They started runnin' stock off the larger spreads an' findin' their rustler's market on the Mexican side. Renaldo an' I heated their shirttails more than once, but every time we thought we had 'em corralled, the trail would come to a sudden end.

So we started prowlin' around the hills where Harris usually pulled his disappearin' act. And if what we'd uncovered at the old petered-out Condon mine tunnel had anything to do with Harris, the rustlers would be facin' law guns next time they struck.

The fact that I wasn't out tonight scourin' for the rustlers ain't as funny as it sounds. Harris was a smart hombre. He knew enough to make himself scarce around where I happened to be. The ranch hands all had their orders. Any man who spotted Harris was to whack in and let me know.

I watched Billy Custer blast the last of his firecrackers an' line for the schoolhouse, which was at the south end of the street. That meant the dance was about to

begin, so the crowd followed him. It was time to call for Julie. Startin' for my sombrero, I stopped, sound-countin' two cayuses comin' fast from the north end.

A second later the two riders hitched before my office. The door crashed open, an' I faced it as Renaldo rose from the swivel chair.

One of the jaspers lunged in frothin' at the mouth. I saw Renaldo's eyes bug out, an' realized mine was doin' the same. We'd never seen anything like this critter before. He was nearly as tall as me, an' thin in a sort of graceful way. Bushy black hair curled over his pinkish ears an' forehead, an' if it wasn't for his waxed mustache I'd swear he was a woman in dude's clothes. He wore a stand-up collar, swallowtail coat, an' stovepipe hat.

Sweat trickled down his thin nose as his lips worked for words. "My Guarnarius!" he gasped, like the world was comin' to an end.

I glanced beyond his narrow shoulders as fat old Roscoe Rae lumbered in, his jowls quiverin' like jelly whilst he chewed on his silvery mustache. Through the door I saw a saddle that looked like a pancake on one of their horses. I knew it wasn't Rae's saddle, so it must be this other jasper's.

"Roscoe, what's this?" I asked, jerkin' my thumb toward the stranger. "An' what's he sputterin' about?"

Rae cleared his throat. "This here's Signor Luigi DeLucci, Gibbons," he rumbled, important.

I told the stranger I was proud to meet him an' stuck out my paw.

The signor drew back. "I do not shak' de hand," he hissed in a funny accent. "My hands musta be save' for museec."

RENALDO gurgled. I gave him a sour look, yanked my Stetson off the desk an' slammed it on. I looked stern-like at the stranger. "Excuse me, mister," I said. "I'm goin' dancin'." I headed for the door.

But old Roscoe strode forward. "Hold on, Gibbons," he said. "DeLucci's fiddle's been stolen from my house."

"Feedle!" Renaldo spat out.

I knew he was hopin' for Bland Harris. So was I, although I'd just as leave Harris wouldn't pick tonight for rustlin'. Renaldo flopped in the chair an' banged his feet on the desk. He was disgusted—but plenty.

"My Guarnerius *esquisito!*" DeLucci sobbed. "She is gone!"

"Gibbons, you got to bring it back," Rae stated.

I remember shovin' my Stetson back an' puttin' my hands on my hips. "Look, Roscoe," I said, not so tolerant, "on the night of the big dance you ask me to go chasin' after this rannie's two-bit cigar box?"

The signor sucked breath like a horrified woman. "Cigar box!" he groaned. "Dolt! De Guarnerius is value' at twenty thousand American dollars!"

I stared at him, then sat back on the desk kind of weak an' looked at Renaldo. His smoky eyes widened.

"Can't be no fiddle worth that!" I snickered. "Roscoe, your amigo's sure a windy-spinner, ain't he?"

Rae wasn't laughin'. "Ain't no windy, Gibbons, you uneducated lawdog!" he asserted. "Me an' the missus met up with DeLucci at a musical shindig last time we was East. Everybody was ravin' about the fiddle."

"In these hands," the signor sighed, extendin' his long, slender fingers, "my Guarnerius has thrilled royalty. De master violin maker of Cremona, Italy, produced it more dan a hundred years ago!"

I shook my head. "Seems like a heap of dinero for a couple scraps of glued-up wood—no matter *who* made it," I said, lookin' at Roscoe to see if he thought so, too. He didn't. "Billy Custer," I went on, "gets mighty pretty music out of his fiddle, an' his ma swapped an old carvin' knife for it out of your kitchen." I turned back to the signor. "DeLucci, you ought to come to the dance tonight an' hear Billy fiddle."

DE LUCCI'S dark eyes flashed, scornful. "I will hear Billy *feedle* another time!" he snapped. "Tonight, I want my Guarnerius!"

"DeLucci showed it to our party about six this evenin'," Rae supplied. "I seen him set it on the pianer—just before we et."

"My *instrumendo 'straordinario*!" DeLucci cried, now excited. "When we return to de music-room, she isa gone!"

Well, I admit I was stumped. Violins all looked alike to me, an' I asked DeLucci how I'd know the Guarnerius even if I *did* find it. He eyed me, pityin'.

Then I heard more about fiddles than I thought there was to know. I've forgot most of it, but I picked out what I thought would come handy in identifyin' the Guarnerius, an' here's what it amounted to: it was finished light red with what the signor said was the Stradivarius secret varnish. It had a maple back an' spruce belly, grained perfect. An outstandin' feature was its purflin'. Purflin', DeLucci said, is the decorative line around the edge of the fiddle's back an' belly. It seemed the Guarnerius had *double* purflin' of inlaid ebony.

DeLucci raved on about his *instrumendo's* beautiful lines an' tone, but I didn't pay much attention. I was busy tryin' to decide where to start, an' not havin' much luck. Renaldo pulled his six, checked the loads, an' waited for my orders. I had none to give.

There was one hunch to go on. Every hardcase left around Whiffletree belonged to Bland Harris. If one of his gunnies knew the signor's cigar-box was valuable as claimed, stealin' it would net the Harris mob a better night's profit than rustlin'. All I had to do was find Harris. But that wasn't easy. I'd been lookin' for his hideout for two months.

Just then Joe Block saved the day by poundin' in from the south. Joe was Roscoe Rae's ramrod. He was a medium-sized, middle-aged gent, an' he sprang down leavin' his winded cayuse still runnin'.

"Rustlers!" Joe cried, hoarse, rushin' in. He stared wild-eyed at Rae. "They're headin' for the Border with them Herefords off the north graze."

"Get the broncs, Renaldo," I growled. "My big night's shot to purgatory, now!" I started slidin' out of my Prince Albert. "Joe," I barked at Block, "grab a fresh cayuse from the stable an' whack back to the Double R. Gather all the hands you can an' meet Renaldo an' me at the lower end of the graze."

RENALDO lined for the livery, grinnin', an' Joe started to follow. But Rae grasped Joe's arm before he got away.

"Bland Harris!" Roscoe bit out.

Joe nodded. "Pete Hays run onto 'em," he related. "They spotted Pete an' blasted his cayuse from under him. He had to hoof it home."

Rae wheeled on me. "Dang your hide, Gibbons!" he exploded. "It's your fault! You passed a half-dozen chances to get Harris. Now you want my hands to wait for you an' Mex, so them rustlers can get away again. Some folks are beginnin' to think you're mebbe on Harris's payroll!"

If it wasn't for my tin star an' Roscoe bein' thirty years older'n me, I'd of busted his snoot right then an' there. I was plenty riled. Three hundred an' sixty-five nights a year, an' Harris had to pick this one.

Everyone around knew about the prize Herefords Rae had imported for breeding purposes. Rae was riled, too. An' it didn't help any of us when the signor stuck *his* nose in the circle.

"Bah to thees Harris!" DeLucci snarled. "I want my Guarnerius!"

I'd forgotten all about DeLucci an' his violin. I told Joe Block to get goin', an' he went.

"Take it easy," I said then to DeLucci. "Harris will be trailin' Roscoes's Herefords. Where we find Harris, I got me a hunch will be your Guarnerius."

The signor got all excited again at that. An' Roscoe said, "I agree with you, Gibbons. An' just to make sure you don't accidental let Harris cross the Border with the Guarnerius *an'* my Herefords, I'm ridin' with you." He eyed me suspicious. "It don't look good what with that Mex deputy who ain't even on this district's payroll. Mebbe Renaldo markets the stock on the other side while you give the rustlers free rein here. Looks to me like a purty good hook-up for Harris!"

DeLucci seemed to think so, too. "I ride weeth you," he declared.

This didn't fit too good with the plan Renaldo and I had agreed on to trap the rustlers. These two rannies would just be in the way with their suspicion. Then I got to thinkin' they'd get tired of eatin' our dust an' turn back, anyways.

"Come along," I said, cordial. "The more the merrier."

I knew Roscoe couldn't ride for beans. As for the signor, I figgered any jasper who rode with a pancake saddle couldn't last the ten miles to the graze. Slippin' into my levis an' stuffin' my pants bottoms in my boots, I felt plumb embarrassed for the sorrel Rae had loaned DeLucci. We all went outside as Renaldo came with our mounts.

LIKE I'd directed Joe Block, he was waitin' at the graze with three of his Double R boys—Pete Hays, Tomahawk Riley, an' Sleeper Sloan. All of 'em but Joe eyed me dirty, wishin' they was at the dance, an' I saw right off I wasn't popular with them boys just then. Tomahawk eyed me extra dirty,'cause he'd had an idea about marryin' Julie, himself.

I had stopped in at Ma Petty's an' told Julie what was up. She was disappointed 'cause I couldn't go to the dance, but was mostly worried about me gettin' back safe an' sound. Said she wouldn't dance with anybody but was goin' to spend all evenin' servin' the lemonade.

Renaldo, DeLucci an' I was ridin' neck, neck, an' neck, with old Roscoe about a hundred yards back, when we reached the Double R boys. I got to admit I sold the signor short about his ridin'. He didn't ride sloppy like most cowpokes do, an' I never saw a man handle a cayuse better.

"Gibbons," Tomahawk said, squint-eyed, "you sure taken your time gettin' here. Harris must be clean to Chihuahua by now!"

I didn't pay no attention. "When we overhaul Harris," I told Block, "you boys keep after him. His mob's got a start, but they can't drive them cows too fast. No matter what Renaldo an' I do, you keep after Harris! Savvy?"

Joe savvied. He said he'd answer for his boys. Just then Roscoe came puffin' up.

"What you an' Renaldo think you're goin' to do?" he asked, still suspicious, an' I cussed myself for talkin' so loud. DeLucci looked at me funny. Them two was goin' to be no help, an' Renaldo an' I would better change our plan accordin'.

"Let's ride!" I said, sharp, an' quirted west with Renaldo an' DeLucci right with me.

Renaldo an' I tried outridin' the signor, but couldn't. That hombre sure wanted his fiddle bad.

I figgered we'd shake him when we reached that felled pine. The trunk was five foot thick anyways, but my old blaze-face lifted over purty as you please. Renaldo took it with me, lookin' like a little circus monkey on that big roan of mine he'd adopted.

Goin' over, I glanced left, an' danged if there wasn't DeLucci sailin' the sorrel over that big trunk like his horse had wings, an' whoopin' to boot!

DeLucci hollered that the terrain reminded him of Corsica where he'd been brought up on his pappy's sheep farm. Renaldo sneered ugly at that, 'cause he didn't like sheepmen very much.

Lookin' back, I saw the Double R boys jump the tree neat, their gun-handles flashin' in the moonlight. I didn't see old Roscoe. By the time he detoured around the trunk he'd be so far back he'd get himself lost in the hills, an' his missus'd make me spend Sunday searchin' for him. Roscoe's sense of direction wasn't very good.

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WE WAS pullin' away from the Double R bunch, but we couldn't shake DeLucci. I muttered for Renaldo to watch me close, an' he nodded.

Pretty soon we heard calves bawlin' beyond the next ledge. I knew the bawlin' came from Rae's Herefords, that Harris an' his gunslicks was drivin' 'em, an' the old Condon Mine wasn't far ahead.

"My critter's picked up a rock!" I said sudden, droppin' back an' sideways.

I climbed down, jerkin' the blaze-face into a thicket. Renaldo pounded on with DeLucci. I hid as Joe Block an' his boys hammered by. Pretty soon Renaldo come canterin' along the slope behind me. He was grinnin' wide 'cause he'd given DeLucci the slip.

We waited for Roscoe Rae to come floppin' by, but he didn't. So Renaldo an' I hitched our mounts an' started climbin' up the steep hill afoot. It was a long haul, but the ground leveled out at the crest. Renaldo grumbled about he'd got sand in his boots. He didn't care much for walkin', anyways, an' the sand didn't help any. I was anxious to get down the other side of the hill, so I left him settin' down emptyin' his boots, an' I went on.

Wasn't long before I heard somebody toein' around up ahead. Crouchin' low, I snook silent toward the snappin' of twigs, an' danged if there wasn't old Rae!

"Roscoe!" I hissed, an' he gasped, jumped a foot, an' come around with a six-gun leveled on me.

"Gibbons!" he faltered. "What you doin' apart from the others?"

I decided to spill the beans before Roscoe got frisky. "I'm bettin' the Harris mob to any minute bust out the other side of the hill with your Herefords," I told him. "The old Condon Mine's gone an' disappeared. I figger Harris muffled up the tunnel's mouth, an' he sure did a good job. Renaldo an' I been lookin' high an' low, but we couldn't find nothin'. The Harris crowd always vanish down there, an' my hunch says they've drilled on through so they can run rustled stock out the other side of the hill."

"By johnny," Roscoe exclaimed, "you're right! That's all *could* happen!" I heard his gun cock. "You an' Renaldo are in with them rats," he raved on, wild-like.

I clawed for one of my .45's, thinkin' to blast Roscoe's gun out of his hand. An' this I don't like to talk about. I'm a hog-tied ninny if I hadn't got so worked up over Guarnerius an' Herefords an' thinkin' what to tell Julie whilst swallerin' Roscoe's insults, that I went off leavin' my Colts danglin' from a wall peg in my office!

Takin' a chance by lungin' at Roscoe, I grabbed his gun-barrel an' twisted as he triggered. The slug fanned my ear, so I took his weapon away from him before somebody got hurt. It was a .38, an' felt awful feathery in my hand, but it was better than nothin'.

"Now, you be good, Roscoe," I told him.

THE blast brought Renaldo runnin' to tangle with the Harris mob. I felt sorry for him, his face dropped so low when he saw only me an' Roscoe. He spat, disgusted, an' we lowered on down the slope. Roscoe followed, fearin' he'd get lost again if he didn't. He cussed us for a pair of owl-hooters all the way.

We had a short wait. Reachin' the canyon floor an' crouchin' in the shadow of a tree, we heard the muffled bawlin' of Roscoe's calves comin' from inside the mountain. Renaldo an' I looked at each other, wise. Our hunch was all aces.

A minute later a door in the canyon wall opened with a crash. A jasper rode out. I knew by his big build an' scraggly beard it was Bland Harris. Then three of his gunmen appeared, an' the Herefords started pourin' out into the canyon.

Before I could stop him, Renaldo grabbed his six an' stepped out into the open. He let a slug fly, just to get things goin' good.

A couple more rustlers busted out of the tunnel an' all six of 'em dropped from their saddles, clearin' their holsters. The shower of hot lead they sent was the thickest I've been in. Renaldo started grinnin' an' thumbin' his gun's hammer. It did me good to see him so happy, 'cause he don't get much fun out of life.

One thing Renaldo an' me got in common, we're both thrifty with bullets an' we don't toss unless we figger to make a ringer. Two rustlers went down with our first blast.

The Herefords spooked, which didn't worry me 'cause they were fat an' lazy an' wouldn't go far. When the last of 'em piled out of the tunnel, the rustlers grabbed their cayuses an' headed for the tunnel's mouth. That was just what I figgered 'em to do. Joe Block, who was in on the deal, would be waitin' with his Double R boys at the other end. We'd have the rustlers caught in their own trap.

All four horses an' rustlers couldn't get into the tunnel at the same time, an' its mouth was a mighty unhealthy place to be. Bland Harris tried to get in first, but lost. Knowin' he was bottle-necked, he whipped his horse about, snarlin'.

RENALDO covered me, an' I ran out just as Harris took off. I grabbed his knee with both hands. The horse kept goin', but Harris didn't. He hit dust, banged his head on a rock, an' passed out.

Everything turned out just as we'd

planned, except one thing—we never found the Guarnerius among the rustler's stuff. DeLucci had stayed with the Double R boys, an' Joe Block told me the signor did right well with a little derringer he was packin' when the rustlers tried to bust out the other side. They'd downed four of 'em, an' the rest was corralled in the tunnel. Joe volunteered to stay an' guard the live ones till mornin'. We looked at our watches. If we whacked hard we'd have time to get in on the tail end of the dance. Renaldo fixed it with Joe to make Tomahawk Riley stay, an' Tomahawk never did get over that.

DeLucci wailed for his Guarnerius all the way home. I still figgered Harris had stolen it. I told DeLucci we'd make Harris tell what he'd done with it as soon as he came to.

When I walked into the schoolhouse, Julie was so worked up about seein' me back all in one piece she spilled a pitcher of lemonade all over Ma Petty's new dress. Pete Hays an' Sleeper Sloan were there. They'd passed word about the Harris mob bein' done for, an' everybody gave me the glad hand when I walked in.

"Folks," the parson said, gettin' on the stage when the crowd quieted, "it gives me great pleasure to announce the weddin' of two of Whiffletree's most beloved children. Julie Webb an' Ute Gibbons will get married one week from tomorrow in my church. You're all invited to the weddin'!"

The crowd went wild with cheerin'. I looked around at Billy Custer an' winked. Then my mouth popped open.

Billy looked at me, grinnin' kind of guilty. He was a skinny little kid about twelve with big freckles an' a pair of sharp eyes that was always lookin' for bigger an' better mischief to get into.

"Havin' a good time, Ute?" he said, weak.

"Yeah," I said, feelin' my eyes squintin' up. "Where'd you get that fiddle, Billy?"

"Why, Ute," he answered, tryin' to act innocent, "you remember that ole' fiddle my ma swapped—"

"Sure," I busted in, "but that ain't it. That fiddle's got *double purflin'!*" I grabbed it away from him. "This here's DeLucci's Guarnerius, an' it's worth twenty thousand dollars, you little snip!"

"Haw! Haw!" Billy guffawed. "There ain't that much money in the whole world! Give it back, Ute, or you'll bust up the dance."

"Where's *your* old fiddle?" I asked him.

"Doggone it!" Billy said, gettin' mad. "I dropped it when I left home this evenin'. My ol' jackass stepped on it an' busted it all to smithereens! I'd saw this cigar-box on Mrs. Rae's pianer, so I borried it for the night!"

I MIGHT have known. Billy's ma cooks for the Raes, an' knowin' Billy lives there with her I should have figgered things out for myself. I asked Julie what she thought we ought to do.

"You shouldn't have taken the violin without permission, Billy," she said, tryin' to look severe. "But, Eugene, since he's played it this long, I don't think it would hurt to let him finish out the dance."

So I gave the Guarnerius back to Billy, tellin' him to be careful of it. Billy stood up an' got his boys goin' on the next tune. Just then Roscoe Rae an' his party walked in. De Lucci was with them. I groaned an' Julie looked a little uneasy.

DeLucci recognized the Guarnerius right off. He froze, with that horrified look on his face. Pretty soon his expression got kind of funny as he listened. Billy was really gettin' plenty music out of that violin.

"A prodigy!" DeLucci yelled at last. "Who is dat child?" he asked of anyone. "I tak' him with me an' he become a great master under Luigi DeLucci!"

Before the night was over, Billy's ma said Billy could go with the signor if she went, too. She'd been lookin' for a good husband ever since Billy's pa got drunk one night an' fell down a cistern. The way DeLucci looked at her while they danced, maybe she found one.

It was pretty late when Julie an' I got through sayin' goodnight to each other after the dance, but I went to my office to see how Renaldo was farin'.

"Gibbons!" Bland Harris blubbered from the cell. "You're back! Keep your deputy off me, will you? Every ten minutes he unlocks the bars, an' comes in an' whacks me! Then he says, 'Where's the Guarnerius?' Consarn it, Gibbons, I don't even know what a Guarnerius *is!*"

NESTER'S PRIVATE WAR

By DON ALVISO

Would the wind-driven dust, that was slowly smothering the hardscrabble Flatiron Valley settlers, cloak Tony Wing's lone-hand, desperate play against Sam Hezel and his ruthless, land-grabbing killer-crew?

FROM the highest point on Branded Rock, Tony Wing looked out over Flatiron Valley. Below him the Settlement lay huddled on the banks of the dry creek bed, the buildings set close together as if depending upon one another for protection from the heat of this land.

Tony shoved back his sombrero and let it hang against his slim back by the thong,

while he wiped the sweat from around the edges of his black hair. But there was no relief from the heat. The glare from the rolling dunes of burned-out soil made his eyeballs throb with a dull hurt.

It didn't seem possible that only six years ago he had ridden ahead of the drive, climbed this same Branded Rock, and looked out over as fine a country as a man could ever ask to see. He had been only a kid then, but he had felt his throat tighten at sight of the lush grass, the silver ribbon of the creek, and his enthusiasm had spread to the others—the Meades and the Camerons and his own people.

The long trail had ended then, the three families turning their lean herds out to graze on the lush grass of Flatiron range.

But this day Tony saw, instead of grass, blown dust that almost covered the posts of the big branding corral. The only relief in the desolate scene was a few clumps of mesquite and wire-brush here and there. Tough as their leaves were, the hardy range cattle could have eaten them and lasted the summer out, if there had been water. But Flatiron Creek had run only a trickle in June. Now, in midsummer, drifting dust was leveling its banks.

Tony's lips pressed tight as he swung his gaze to the west. Over there, the land lay more rugged. Squinting his eyes against the sun, Tony could make out on a far hill a sprawled log cabin. That cabin was the headquarters of Sam Hezel and his cutthroat crew. And Sam Hezel was keeping for himself all the water of Raging River, just beyond.

Tony's gray eyes darkened and his tongue came out to move slowly over dry, cracked lips as he thought of the river, rushing cool and narrow and deep in the chasm of its rocky bed.

He said aloud, "There's only one answer. Hezel's got to die."

Another voice came from behind him. "Bad thing about killin', Tony, is that it cleans up everything for the man that'd ought to live on and suffer, and lets you go on with just one more weight naggin' at your insides."

Tony turned to look into the grizzled features of Marshal Pop Morton. Pop went on slowly, "Sam Hezel's on leased land, Tony, and with his lease runnin' for three years more. . ."

Tony's voice was bitter. "Us cattlemen here can't last three years more. Not even one."

His eyes went again to the log house on the hill. Sam Hezel had hogged half a million acres of buffalo feeding-ground along Raging River for a ten-year period. It was history, the big money Sam had made at first, killing buffalo for their hides. But now that he had slaughtered them down to a few straggling herds, and those few had crossed the divide to new feeding grounds farther west, the greedy killer was turning his sights on new prey.

"Look, Pop!" Tony said. "Sam Hezel wants Flatiron range, too. He knows the dry years will pass, and he'll be safe anyhow, with Raging River. And he won't stop at anything." Then, bitterly, "Maybe you've forgotten my brother Pat—how he rode over to make a deal with Hezel, when Flatiron Creek dried up. All we wanted was right of way across Hezel's land to the river—and Pat never came back to tell us what Hezel said."

THE old marshal nodded grimly. "I ain't forgot a thing, son. I ain't forgot that, nor how you Settlement folks was gettin' ready to ride over to Hezel's and have it out with him, when I come. And I ain't forgot that you all agreed to leave me to clean up the business, neither."

Tony's eyes were cold. "But you ain't done it, Pop."

"I know, son. I rid over to Hezel's and went over that place with a fine-tooth comb, but I couldn't find ary shred of proof that they'd killed Pat. The law's got to have proof, Tony."

Tony got to his feet. "The law does—but not me," he said. "I've got all the proof I want—a bellyful of it." He turned and stalked off down the natural trail toward the base of Branded Rock.

As he went, the dry hot air around him began to stir. The wind was coming up again. Off to the southwest, dust clouds began to rise and roll toward Flatiron, like a marching army of pestilence.

When Tony passed Clem Meade's house, Clem's twelve-year-old Jimmy was trying to coax a bucketful of water from the well they had hopefully dug in the back yard. He stopped.

"How goes it, Jimmy?" he asked.

The boy looked up, his freckled, too-thin face streaked with grime, his tow hair stiff with sweat and dust, and his eyes red-rimmed from heat—or tears. "This damn' dust!" he choked, swearing manfully to keep the sob out of his voice. "Ma's thirsty, and—" he tipped the bucket to show the half-gallon of muddy water that nobody could drink. "She's worse! She can't last long this way—I heard Sary Cameron say so!"

Tony's fingers dug into the bony shoulder; it was a minute before he could speak. Then he said, "Strain it through a piece of flannel, Jimmy. Maybe after it's settled—"

The boy shook his head and his eyes were like those of a whipped puppy. "'Twon't do no good." Then, in a burst of desperation, "Can't we do *somethin'*, Tony?"

Tony stood very still a moment, then he nodded, spoke quietly. "We can. And we will, Jimmy." He gave the boy a pat on the shoulder as he left him.

Tony went on past the twin houses where the two Cameron families lived—houses whose boards had been weathered, by sun and wind-driven dust, half a century in six years. Just beyond was his father's house.

Rob Wing was outside. Against the silver-gray of the unpainted wood, his tall shape seemed taller, gaunter. Tony's mother had died in the country the Wings had forsaken for Flatiron, and since Pat had ridden over toward Raging River and never returned, Tony could see the fight gradually leaving old Rob.

He turned his weathered face toward Tony now. "She's comin' again," he said dully, nodding toward the approaching dust clouds. "If there was only a way a man could get out of this Godforsaken place! But we can't. Everybody's got everything they ever had, sunk in here."

Tony leaned against the wall without speaking, his gaze on the log cabin on the hill. It was already growing hazy because of the first drifts of dust.

Rob Wing's eyes followed his. Suddenly he jerked out, "Damn him! Why don't the wind ever blow in the right direction to blow dust in *his* eyes?"

Dust in Hezel's eyes, Tony thought. That's what was needed. The men of the Settlement would have ridden up and had it out with Hezel before this, law or no law, if they hadn't known how hopeless it was. The way Hezel's cabin was set, nobody could approach it without being seen miles away. And Hezel's cutthroat crew outnumbered the Settlement men two to one.

But with a dust-haze settling over the valley, like now, riders could come to the very foot of the hill without being seen.

Just the same, Hezel's cabin would still be lifted above the haze. There'd be the hill to climb, and Hezel's crew would still hold the high odds. On the day, which was bound to come soon, when the Settlement men would be driven by desperation to make the try, it could result only in one thing—death for all the Settlement men.

After a moment Tony turned to his father, tried to speak casually. "Better go inside, Dad." He put a hand on the old man's shoulder. "Maybe things will get better. The sky looked kinda different from up on Branded Rock. It might rain."

"It might," Rob Wing replied, without looking at him.

TONY started for the saddle shed. The low, rolling advance of the dust storm was sweeping over the Settlement now; he felt the gritty quality in the air he breathed.

In the shed, Tony removed the cover from a big lard can, took out a piece of clean rag. He moved to the small window and began to wipe the abrasive dust-particles from his gun, dust grains that clung to the oiled surfaces and made the action sluggish and uncertain. He did it with slow, thoughtful deliberation, his eyes going to the window, waiting for the moment when the wind would ease, leaving the ash-dry dust hanging inert and heavy over Flatiron.

It came at last.. The light through the dust-powdered window grew a little stronger, and Tony knew that the air had grown still. Wiping the dust from the six cartridges, he slipped them back into the chambers. Then he stepped from the shed, closed the door behind him and made his way toward the saddle stock.

In the corral the horses stood, tails limp, heads dejectedly lowered. Yesterday they had been driven four miles up the creek to the last pool of water that remained in the dry bed. When they left it, their thirst only half-satisfied, they were licking at barren dust.

As his gaze touched one mount after an-

other, Tony lifted his head, and his hands came up to grip the poles of the corral gate. He counted them again. There were the five bays that belonged to the Meades, in the near corner. The Meades favored bays. There was his own claybank gelding along with six of the Cameron mounts. They were all there—except his father's big black. And his father's saddle was gone from the post by the gate.

For the time it would take a man to hook a cinch and pull up on the latigo, Tony Wing stood staring between the poles of the corral fence.

Then he knew.

His father had figured it out just as he had. If one man could make it to the hill cabin and get a chance at Sam Hezel, the slaughter of an open fight could be avoided, for without Hezel, his crew would scatter. Rob Wing had gone himself, because it meant almost certain death, even if he got Hezel before he went. And—Tony smiled grimly as he recalled Pop Morton's words—if he got away there would be the law to reckon with.

Tony stood only a moment longer, then he strode over and got his own gear. He lowered one pole of the gate and slipped through, saddling his claybank. Then he eased down the rest of the poles, quietly, to make no noise that might call attention to what he was about.

Having opened the gate, Tony mounted and kneed his claybank around the corral, edging the saddle stock toward the gate. In a moment their thirst-dazed senses would realize they were free, and keen scent would do the rest. They would take it slow at first, but when the smell of water became stronger, they would break in a mad dash for Raging River.

Hezel's men would be after them. When they caught them, they'd corral them, and every Settlement man would be afoot. But, Tony reflected, you can't ride a horse that has died of thirst.

He went to the Meade's poor well and soaked his handkerchief in the cupful of muddy water in the bottom of the bucket. He tied it loosely around his face so that it hung from the bridge of his nose. When he got back to his mount, he saw only the rumps of the last of the other saddle stock disappearing into the dust gloom of the west. He mounted and followed.

AFTER a while the dust-blanket began to lighten, and Tony could see the dim red disc of the sun getting closer to the western horizon. A little farther and the air would be almost free of dust.

He moved more cautiously, scanning the low ridges of the rising ground for some sight of his father, but failed to see him. Like himself, Rob Wing would keep to cover, now that he was coming out of the dust blanket.

Suddenly Tony straightened, conscious of some change; it was as if a sixth sense had warned him. He strained his dust-bitten eyes and made out the cabin ahead of him, on the hill. There was no movement there. Then he felt the first stir of sluggish air... but different from that other dust-laden wind.

He turned in the saddle, looked behind. He saw at first only the heavy-hanging blanket of dust; then it began to break up and move, as if some sudden pressure from beyond were pushing it.

His eyes widened and his breath caught queerly in his dry throat. It couldn't be—but it was. The wind was rising in the east. His father had wished that the wind would blow in the right direction to carry the dust into Hezel's eyes. Well, if the wind kept up, Rob Wing would get his wish—the dust would cover even Sam Hezel's cabin.

Tony smiled. Against his neck was that unmistakable feel of moving air. "Get on!" Tony called to the claybank, and coaxed a slow lope from the underfed animal. Ahead he could see the band of Settlement horses, noses thrust forward and tails flying, cutting a fast course south of Hezel's cabin, straight for the river.

He urged the claybank faster. Maybe the smell of water helped, for he did take on a little speed. Almost to the top of the next rise, Tony stopped, lowered the handkerchief from his face and took another long look for his father. If the two could get together, plan out their action.... But it was futile. Rob Wing was nowhere in sight.

He went on. From the top of the ridge, he made out a group of men leaving Hezel's corral. The riders broke into a fast gallop and swept down the long slope southward toward the horses who were going hell-bent for water.

So far, so good. No time to look for his father now. He had to get to Hezel at the

cabin—he was sure the big boss wouldn't go chasing a few horses—and fight it out before the dust drove the riders home again.

HE WAS only halfway up the hill when the dust overtook him, sweeping over him and past, blinding and choking him. Tony pulled the handkerchief, dry as a bone now, over his nose and trusted to instinct for direction. Occasionally he lifted his head; at last he caught a break in the advance fringe of the storm, saw Hezel's corral and the log cabin. And between them—

Tony half-rose in the saddle and let out a brittle curse. For there, riding on the black, swaying in his saddle, was his father. And Rob Wing rode straight for the cabin.

Tony tried to push the panting claybank, but the animal was jaded. It stumbled, then stopped, swung half around. Tony reached out, felt a smooth pole. This would be the east fence of Hezel's corral.

He stepped down, worked his way along the pole fence to the corner nearest the cabin. Then he left, striking out boldly in the gray mass toward where he thought the cabin would be. He counted his steps. If he went past five hundred, he was off his course. Doggedly he kept track. Four hundred and two. . . three. . . .

He went rigid as two shots sounded, only a little ahead.

He heard a choked cry. Casting all caution aside, he leaned with the wind and ran, for he knew that choked voice, knew that his father had stopped Hezel's lead.

More shots, and now there came the threatening zing of speeding bullets, dangerously close. His left foot struck a soft bulk invisible on the ground, and he tripped.

He crawled back to the prone figure. "Dad!" he said hoarsely. "Dad!"

There was a groan. Rob Wing still lived, at least, but that was little consolation. Tony pushed his hat back, then turned grimly, began crawling toward the cabin. He was close enough now to see the gun-flashes—from two spots, uncomfortably close.

Tony halted, jerked out his gun and fired at the flashes coming from the left. It put an end to them, but the lead hailed at him from the right. Something slapped and burned with stunning impact at his shoulder, and he leaped to his feet, firing again, then jumped away.

Still the lead followed him. He dived to the side again, then forward—and collided with another form with such impact that both men seemed to rebound. Tony lifted his gun—felt his hand go numb as another gun struck his, knocked it from his hand. He saw that other gun lift, heard Sam Hezel's voice:

"I'm glad you sneaked in with the dust, the two of you! Now—"

Tony dived at the gun-hand, clamping the wrist with both his own, though he had to force the numbed muscles to do it. Twisting, bearing down, at the same time he heaved his own body around in a half-swing. Hezel swore. His bulk came around, wavered and crashed to the ground.

Tony landed on top of him, with an elbow pushed hard against Hezel's throat. But his weight was no match for the other's thick-set muscular bulk. Hezel's knees came up, caught Tony in the ribs with a breath-taking impact, and before Tony could get a new grip, Hezel had wriggled free, was clambering to his feet.

They came upright together and there, half-hidden from each other by the fog of dust that covered the earth and masked the sun, Tony Wing and Sam Hezel fought on, fought as lethally as if their weapons had been sixguns instead of bruised and bleeding fists.

Hezel's thick arms swung sledge-hammer blows, and when one landed, Tony staggered under the bone-crushing force. Hezel kept trying to work behind him in the gloom, lashing in from the side unexpectedly. One of the blows caught Tony on the ear, knocking him to the ground. He came up dazed but wary, and using his hands only to ward off Hezel's attack, waited for another of those long side swings.

It came at last. Tony swayed back just enough to let the fist pass harmlessly by his head. Then his hands came up, grasping that hairy arm.

One quick shift and Tony was behind Hezel, then around him, pulling and jerking his arm around and up. Another catlike move and Tony was in front of the big man again, his left arm around Hezel's thick middle, his right in a vise-like grip on Hezel's thumb, pulling Hezel's arm flat against his back. Tony heaved.

Hezel groaned and went limp, just as pounding hoofbeats sounded near the corral.

TONY stood up, choked, spitting blood and dust past battered lips. He strained his eyes through the dust, imagined he made out the bulked shadows of men coming toward him. From still farther away there were inquiring shots. Hezel's men, sure enough—brought back by the storm and the shots. Hezel's men—and Tony's gun was gone. If he fumbled and found it, it would be clogged with dust.

Then a familiar voice sounded. "Tony! Rob! Tony Wing!"

It was Pop Morton. Here!" called Tony, and in another instant the lanky lawman was emerging from the dust. With him was another figure, taller and lankier, but there was no time for introductions.

"We got to run for the cabin!" Pop said. "Sam's men are back."

Tony stood very still. Three against twenty—with the dust beginning to lift, ready to expose their predicament to that cutthroat crew. Already they were coming closer, cautiously.

He turned to the marshal. "Dad's right over there," he said. "Look after him as much as you can, if there's a chance." Then suddenly he sprang forward, shouting, "Come on, fellows! Here they are—right in the trap! Close in on 'em!"

His feet pounded toward them. From ahead came a startled yell. "I said it was fishy—them stock comin' like that! It *was* a trap—and I ain't payin' for any of Sam's dirty deals!"

Like stampeded cattle, the men turned, rushed for their horses, and the river canyon echoed with flying hoofs.

Pop Morton spoke from beside Tony. "They'll be runnin' into the posse that's comin' to join me, anyhow. Listen, son, your pa's all right—that's the main thing. Just a bullet-graze. And Tony, this is Deputy Dave Casey. He just got here to bring me the results of an investigation I started. Sam Hezel's so-called lease was a fraud, Tony. He'll spend some time behind bars regrettin' it."

The weariness left Tony and he straightened his shoulders. "You mean—this is all open range?"

Pop Morton nodded. "Hezel had no more right to it than anybody else!"

Tony grinned. "If I can find a mount," he said, "I'll make it back with the news."

"You don't need to," Pop said. "I stopped that way myself. Just step to the corner of the cabin there and take a look."

Tony strode over, looked across Flatiron, toward the Settlement. Dust still veiled the valley thinly, but at last his eyes made it out—the shapeless, moving, dark blot that would be straggling lines of cattle. Behind them came the tiny specks that were men afoot. Men and cattle of the Settlement, coming to water.

ROAD AGENT! KILLER! WANTED MAN!

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"Start blasting!" Pete yelled.

SMOKY REUNION

By JAMES SHAFFER

Pete Collins figured his big brother had just been using him as a damn' slave all those lean years—and now it was high time to hit the out-trail . . . But the trail he chose led only to a swift, blazing death, both for Pete, and for the brother who was trying to protect him.

PETE COLLINS looked at the money in the palm of his hand, then at his older brother Rance. Pete managed a weak grin.

"You're kiddin', Rance. Now let me have the rest of it."

Rance looked at Pete across the rough hand-hewn table in their little sod cabin. Pete had worked like a slave the past year, often without a dime in his pocket; always looking forward to the day when they'd have something to market. And now that they had marketed, Rance had hoped Pete would be satisfied with the few dollars he'd given him. But—

"The rest of it's in the bank, Pete," Rance said. Pete looked surprised, then grinned. "Good! Allus did want to know how it felt to write a check. Reckon it sorta makes a man feel important."

"Well—uh—don't guess you'll be writing any checks on it. Since you're not twenty-one years old yet, the bank account's in just my name."

"I been doing a man's work, ain't I?" said Pete. "Looks like I orta be able to write my own checks. But—shucks, just write out me a check for my share. I'm in a hurry."

"You don't understand, Pete," Rance said slowly. "Believe me, kid, I know how hard you've worked all year—how hard we've both worked. But that—" he jerked his head toward the money in Pete's hand—"is all you're going to get to spend right now."

"Yeah?" Pete's voice was husky with rising anger. "You're kiddin', ain't you, Rance—you're trying to tease me. C'mon, I got things to do with that money!"

"I know what you want to do with it," Rance said, "but we got more important things to do with that money than spend it on fine clothes to impress some gal—"

"Keep her name outa this!" Pete flared. "You've had new clothes since I had. You're sore 'cause she's been paying a little attention to me lately—that's why you don't want me to have any new clothes—want me to look like a tramp!"

"That ain't so, Pete—"

"I'm sick and tired of your bossing!" Pete snarled. "If I can't get my share in money I'll take it outa your hide!"

He lashed out at Rance. The older brother ducked the first blow, but Pete bent low and came boring in. Rance covered up, gave ground, hoping that Pete would come to his senses.

"—see who's boss—" Pete grunted. He caught Rance on the jaw with a looping right. The little sod shanty swam before Rance's eyes; then danced in a mad gyration as Pete's fist connected again.

Rance fought back then, but his knees were already wobbly. He tried to ward off Pete's blows, to get in one of his own, but his younger brother's fists were everywhere. He felt the jar as they landed solidly; and things began to swim in his vision. Then he wasn't feeling the blows at all

He came to with his face pressed against the dirt floor. Pete was standing over him, fists still doubled, breathing heavily.

"Had enough?"

Rance nodded painfully.

"Then," said Pete, "you can go to hell. I'm through."

Dazedly, Rance watched him roll his few belongings in a blanket and stalk out.

After a while, Rance got up and bathed his swollen face in cold water. By chore time, he could hardly see out of either eye, and the slightest movement of his body was sheer torture. He got the chores done, then hobbled around getting supper.

He was setting the table, and from force of habit, reached for two plates. Then he slipped one back in the cupboard.

"Let him get his own supper when he comes in," he thought grimly.

But Pete didn't come home. Although he was dog-tired, aching in every fibre, sleep would not come to Rance that night. He kept listening for the familiar hoofbeats. When he finally dropped into a troubled doze, they still had not come.

The next evening, still no Pete. Rance saddled up and started for town.

"Had just enough money to get good and drunk—and get in jail," he thought as he hoisted himself painfully into the saddle.

FIVE years before, the two brothers had been left to shift for themselves at their father's death. Rance had become the breadwinner until Pete got old enough to hold down a job.

Four years, then, they had worked, scrimping and saving every penny of their wages, to get a stake. The stake had bought the little Double Slash ranch. Pete had been overjoyed, and had visions of big money.

But Rance knew better. It would be some time before the little ranch would begin to pay off and show a profit. That money in the bank, that they'd gotten for the sale of their first yearlings, would just about cover expenses for the coming year. If they spent it—and had to rely on a loan from the bank—they'd be worse off than before.

He reined up in front of the little saddle shop on the corner of Main Street.

"Hello, Mr. Wingate. Nora around?"

Herb Wingate looked up from the saddle he was repairing. "Yeah. Here she comes now."

Rance's heart, as it always did, gave a thump as he saw her, and he was suddenly all thumbs and no tongue.

"Your face?" she asked. "Did you and Pete—"

Rance nodded. "We did."

The girl looked troubled. "I thought you were going to tell him about—us."

"I tried to," Rance said, "but I kinda figured it was just a case of puppy love with him, and that it'd wear off in a little while."

"I told him that you and I were going to be married," Nora said. "He didn't say anything—just walked off. He's been over in the Oasis ever since."

Rance nodded. "He'll get over it. It's just that you're the first girl that was ever nice to him. I'll go over and get him."

He walked down the street and into the Oasis Saloon. Mike Riley, the bartender, motioned him over. Rance shot a sidewise glance at a corner table as he walked over to the bar. Pete was in the poker game.

"Git 'im outa here," Mike Riley told Rance softly. "All hell's brewing at that table."

"Who's the hombres he's playing with?" Rance asked. There were five men in the game. Rance knew two of them, and of course, Pete. But the other two—

"Couple of hardcases," Mike replied. "The chunky one calls hisself Slow Jim Akers, and the slick-haired dude's name is Ace Perdue—been hanging around town for a couple of weeks. Right now, they're sorer'n the devil 'cause the kid's been winning."

Rance nodded. "I'll git him." He walked over to the table. Ace Perdue looked up. He noted the resemblance between Rance and Pete, and his beady black eyes became instantly suspicious.

"Who's this, kid?" he asked slowly.

"Dunno," Pete said blurrily, half-turning. Then, "Hey! I saw you palm that card!"

Ace Perdue cursed and came to his feet. The whole action after that was just a blur to Rance's eyes. He saw Pete give the table a shove; saw Ace Perdue stumble as it hit him, then heard the roar of Pete's gun.

Ace Perdue jackknifed backwards as the heavy slug caught him.

"Drawed on an unarmed man!" Slow Jim Akers yelled. "Murder!"

The blood drained from Pete's face. He whirled around nervously, like a trapped animal, his smoking Colt in his fist.

"Don't nobody move!" He backed toward the door.

"Pete—wait!" Rance started for his brother. Pete flung up an arm to shove him away.

Rance knocked the arm down and grabbed at Pete. "You gosh-darn fool! Stop this!"

"Look out!" It was Mike Riley yelling. Pete was trying to free himself from Rance's grip. Then a gun blasted. Rance stared unbelieving as Pete jerked, then swayed. Slow Jim Akers was thumbing back for another shot when Pete fired. Slow Jim yelled and went down.

"Pete—stop!" Rance saw the gun-barrel swinging toward his head, and tried to duck. He saw Pete's grim face, then the world exploded into a million lights.

He got a last look at Pete as he staggered through the door, the whole side of his shirt bloody where he'd been shot as Rance had held him. Then blackness closed over Rance. . . .

HE CAME TO sputtering at the strong liquor Mike Riley was pouring down his throat. He steadied the bottle to his lips for one big gulp, then felt the lump on his head. Feeling that lump brought the whole thing back.

All he could think of for a moment was that he had held Pete while some one had shot him. Pete hadn't had a chance.

"'Twas a mighty crack he gave you," Mike Riley said. "That gun-barrel must be bent double."

Rance got to his feet. "Where's Pete?"

Riley looked solemn. The crowd in the saloon shifted uneasily and looked the other way.

"Couldn't say," Mike said. "Pete lit out. Kinda figured, from what he said when he left, that he's sore at you."

Rance glanced at the card table. It had been righted, and the chairs put back in place. Fresh sawdust had been sprinkled liberally to hide the ugly stains. That was all Rance saw. He grabbed his hat and hurried up the street. But as he neared the sheriff's office, he grew puzzled. Sheriff Lafe Stollins was in his office, feet propped up on the desk.

"Got a posse out after Pete?" Rance asked abruptly. "If you have, call 'em off!"

The sheriff shook his head. "No charges against Pete. The undertaker found three cards up Ace Perdue's sleeve—also a hide-out derringer he was reaching for when Pete's slug stopped him."

Rance breathed a sigh of relief. "Slow Jim Akers?"

The sheriff grunted. "Man, you *have* been unconscious! Pete just creased his skull. He's around town here somewhere."

THAT was all Rance wanted to know. He hit a high lope for home. But when the ranch came in sight, he could see no sign of Pete's mount. He pulled to a sliding halt at the corral and trotted toward the house.

"Hold it!" Pete's voice rasped like a file. Rance stopped in the doorway. The youngster was hunkered back in the corner of the room, his gun trained on the door.

"You've done enough shooting with that thing today," Rance said testily. "Put it away."

"Go to hell," Pete said evenly, and the gun didn't waver. He was clumsily trying to bandage his shoulder, and Rance saw him wince with pain.

"Aw, now, kid," Rance stepped forward. The double click of Pete's gun coming to full cock stopped him.

"That's far enough," Pete said through clenched teeth. "You had one chance to git rid of me today, and I ain't giving you another."

Rance felt his face turn hot-red. "That's a lie, Pete, and you know it."

"No I don't," Pete said. "If you could git your hands on me, you'd turn me over to that posse."

"There's no posse on your trail," Rance said. "Lemme tell you what happened—"

"That's what you want to do," Pete went on, ignoring Rance's words. "Git rid of me, then you'd have all the ranch—and the gril too. I found that out today." There was deep bitterness in his voice; bitterness that cut into Rance like a sharp knife.

"You ain't got it straight, Pete."

"I got it straight enough," Pete went on in a dull monotone. "You figured to work me till you got the ranch going and could afford to hire a crew—then you'd get rid of me and marry Nora. And what better way is there to git rid of a man than send him to prison for murder?" Pete was tying the crude bandage into place, and for a moment, the gun in his hand wavered.

Rance leaped.

Pete jerked to one side and Rance's clutching fingers missed; he piled up in the corner. He scrambled around trying to get back on his feet, and then he saw the gun-barrel descending for the second time that day. . . .

When he struggled back to consciousness, he knew he'd been out for hours. The sun was low over the western hills. There was no sign of Pete. Rance walked on wobbly legs into the lean-to bedroom. He swore under his breath.

The room was in complete disorder, and as Rance stared into the shambles, he realized that Pete's belongings were missing. He looked out the window toward the corral; the big black gelding was gone.

He bathed the lump on his head with cold water until some of the throbbing left, then saddled up and rode toward town.

There was a chance, he thought grimly, that some of his talk had sunk into Pete's mind, and that Pete had ridden into town to find out if he were wanted by the law.

PETE'S gelding was nowhere in sight. Rance strolled around town, making a few inquiries. People looked at him curiously when he asked about Pete, then shook their heads. No. Pete hadn't been in town that they knew of.

Rance rode by a neighboring ranch, and made arrangements for one of the punchers to care for the Double Slash for a few days. Then he rode on home. He rolled his blankets and tied them behind his saddle, then lit a lantern and walked around the Double Slash buildings. He found what he was looking for—the hoofprints of the gelding, leading away from the ranch. He blew out the lantern and swung into the saddle, following the trail of the gelding.

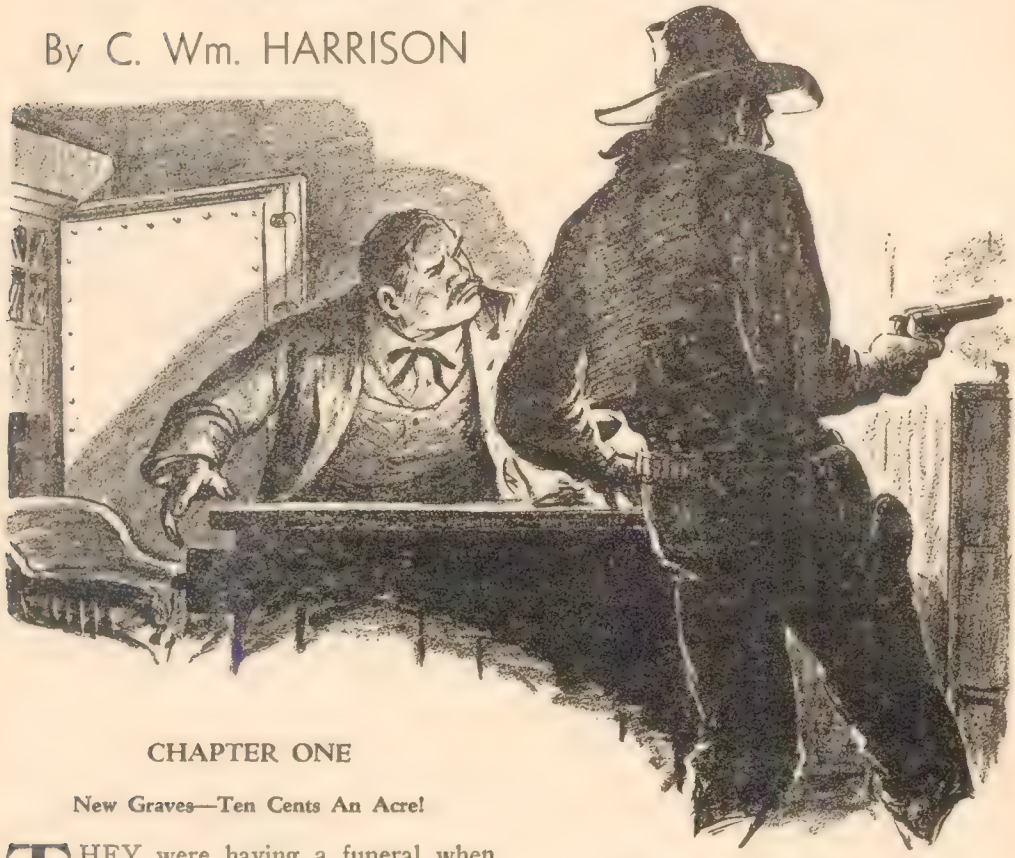
The next dark found him high in the mountains, and still miles behind Pete. Fearful of losing the trail in this rough country, he camped for the night, and took up the chase at daybreak.

At noon he found where Pete had stopped to change the bandage on his shoulder, and

(Continued on page 95)

BLACK GOLD FOR COWMEN'S BLOOD!

By C. Wm. HARRISON



Somehow, he turned and put his bullet into Hinton's chest. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

New Graves—Ten Cents An Acre!

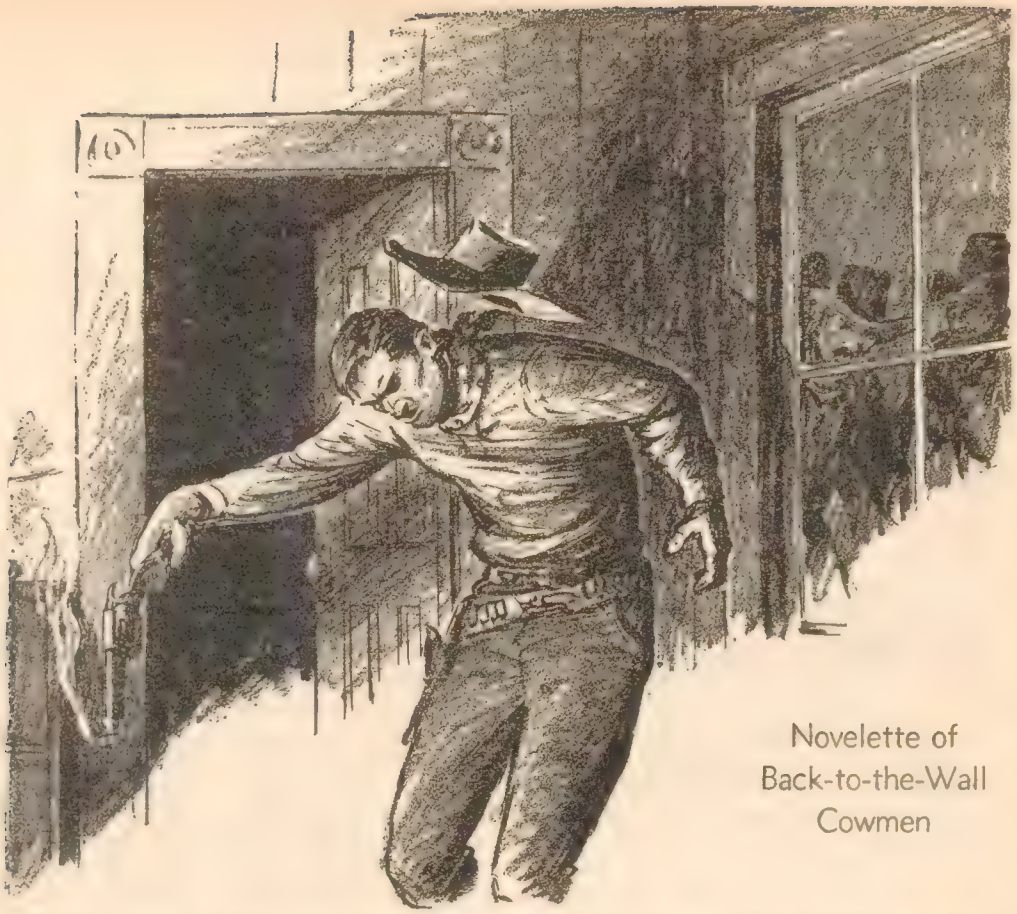
THEY were having a funeral when Rink Bantner and Laredo Smith rode into Jawbone. The two riders came down the steep bluff that overlooked the river, with the afternoon sun striking full against their faces. The road they followed curved hot and dusty around the low hill that was the town's graveyard.

The open grave and the coffin and the few people around it were just ahead, and Rink drew his mount in. His hat was pulled low against the bitter glare of the sun, and weariness and impatience were in the lines around his mouth. He made a tall, straight shape in his saddle, dusty and trail-worn, a two-day's stubble of beard on his long jaw.

"We'll wait here," he announced.

"What fer?" Laredo Smith was a dried-up, sun-cured man grown old in the saddle, and habitually crochety. "We've been bouncin' from town to town the last three weeks lookin' fer grass. As rushed up as you are to find graze, why-so you're wastin' time here?"

Rink Bantner motioned one long hand toward the cemetery. It was only a small funeral party standing around the open grave: a heavy-shouldered old man; a boy who couldn't have been more than eleven, stringy and freckled, with his small hands clenched tight at his sides. The girl who stood close by the old man was tall and strong-made. Her hair was full and dark. Rink could see only a small part of her face.



Novelette of
Back-to-the-Wall
Cowmen

When Rink Bantner leased that desperately-needed graze from old Jeff Winters, he didn't realize he was also buying into the cowman's last-ditch fight against an oil-king's tyranny . . . But Rink came from a fighting breed whose proudest boast was, "What we bite off, we can chaw!"

And there was a preacher at the head of the grave, administering the last rites in a low, clear voice.

". . . all trails of Man lead to our Maker. . . ."

"No need to kick up dust on the road, Laredo." Rink said. "It would drift over there, and we can spare a few minutes."

Laredo grunted.

"We can move on if you want," Rink suggested. "It sure won't bother us any." He picked up his reins.

The oldster settled back in his saddle. "I can stand some rest. Quit tryin' to shove me around, Rink."

And so they waited there in the heat of the road. When the coffin was lowered into the earth, and the first loose dirt was shoveled into the grave, they moved on.

JAWBONE was a town that had been built in sections, sprawling out planlessly to give room where it was needed. Once only a trading post built where the cattle trails converged to cross the Clearwater, now a railroad trestle bridged the river, and that had given a new impetus to the growth of the town. Shipping pens sprawled along the tracks. Once past them, Rink was on the broad rut-carved street of the town proper.

It was just another range town to Rink

Bantner; front-flared merchandise stores, saloons and honkytonks, a red-brick courthouse. He gave them all but slight attention.

Grass was the core of his thinking, his only interest. He had spent three weeks on the trail combing the country for grassland that could be rented or leased. He had to find graze if his herd of cattle, two hundred miles down the trail, was to survive the winter.

Laredo Smith rode his grulla at a walk, all his weight on one stirrup as he surveyed the town with his watery blue eyes. In his face was the frank distaste of a man who was old enough to show his feelings and get away with it.

"One thing, this ain't a cowtown, not any more."

The town's streets had been gutted by the iron tires of heavy freight-wagons. Some of these wagons, loaded with timbers and donkey engines and iron piping, creaked and groaned against the traffic of rough-garbed laborers.

"Oil," Rink murmured.

Laredo Smith spat.

Because they had been too long in the heat and dust, they stopped first in the nearest saloon to kill their thirst. The place boasted the name "Broken Spur," but the crowd inside was not made up of cattlemen. The bar was lined with men who spoke in a broken, foreign tongue, and others who talked loud and confident. Sipping his beer, Rink listened to the run of the conversation.

"They brought in number three well yesterday, but if I know oil it won't produce any longer than the others. I tell you the big pool is under Bucksaw Basin. Macklin knows that."

MACKLIN! Rink's interest stirred. He had come to Jawbone to find a man by the name of Macklin—Chance Macklin. His glance moved to the mirror behind the bar, and reflected in it he saw the two men beside him. One man was plainly an oil worker, rawboned and red-faced. The other was a gunman by every sign of the profession: lean and whippy and chill-eyed. The oiler's gaze was on the gunman.

"You think Macklin will ever get the Basin?"

"He'll get it all right."

"I don't know," the oilman said doubtfully. "Jeff Winters settled the Basin when he had to fight Injuns to keep it. His wife wouldn't let him sell, even if he'd wanted to."

"She's dead now, and buried." There was a strange, malevolent satisfacton in the gunman's voice.

"But Winters daughter ain't, and Myra is just like her ma was when it comes to holdin' the Basin. It won't be easy to change her mind, Sid. And old Jeff is as stubborn as a donkey engine in a snow-storm."

Sid's smile was thinly mirthless. "Chance Macklin has ways, "he whispered. "If Winters balks too long, Macklin's got me and Webb Dolan, ain't he?"

Rink finished his drink, and followed Laredo Smith out of the saloon. The old puncher was in a starchy humor.

"You hear that, Rink? The only open graze we've heard of around here is owned by Chance Macklin. And he don't sound much like good company to me."

"We've got to have grass," Rink said.

The oldster's stare was narrow and hard. He had heard everything Rink had heard. Macklin was a man who threw a lot of weight in this country, and he apparently wasn't particular how he used it so long as he got what he wanted. The fact that Macklin was an oilman was damnation enough in Laredo Smith's mind. And the knowledge that Macklin was putting the pressure of hired guns against this cowman, Jeff Winters, was the final argument.

"You want to deal with a gent like Macklin?" Laredo demanded.

"We've got to have grass," Rink said stubbornly.

THEY found Chance Macklin in the office of the Nations Oil Development Company. He loomed big and heavy behind his desk, with a blocky jaw and a blunt way of using his eyes and voice.

"So you're a cowman driving north. You picked a pretty bad time to move cattle, Bantner."

"You ever work cattle, Mister Macklin?" Laredo Smith asked with a thin trace of sarcasm.

Macklin jerked his head. "Oil is my business."

"Cattle is our business." the old puncher drawled.

Rink spoke quickly, to avoid any friction between the two men. "I had no choice in makin' my drive. There's been a bad drought down in Texas, and I bought up my herd at a good price. I'm movin' them north, but I need a range to winter them on until I can sell on next spring's market. I heard over in Lubank that you had graze you might lease."

Macklin nodded, his eyes dark and speculative. "I've got four thousand acres."

Rink said, "I won't need more than two thousand."

Chance Macklin was a hard man to deal with, and he showed it in the tight trap of his mouth. "I'll lease all or none, Bantner. Take it or leave it."

Rink hesitated. He had bought his cattle in Texas at a good price, but he had his hands to feed and pay, and if he was to sell out next spring at a profit he would have to cut corners. Four thousand acres was more than he needed, but if the price was right he could make out.

"All right," he said slowly. "It's your land, Macklin. How much?"

"Twenty-five cents an acre."

Amazement struck Rink Bantner. "Two-bits!" Anger began riding his nerves, and he tried to fight it down.

"Take it or leave it!" Chance Macklin snapped.

Rink's temper jerked out of his grip and flared. "You tell me to take that price and like it! Why don't you stick a gun in my back and have it over with? You're askin' twice what that range is worth. Hell, I just want to lease it, not buy it! Why don't you—"

The office door slapped open, letting in a girl's angry voice. "You'll have to use your gun to stop me from seeing Macklin. Why don't you try that, Webb Dolan?"

THE GIRL who came into the room was the one Rink had seen in the graveyard. Her face was white with anger and contempt. A man came prowling after her, lank and smooth in his movements, cold fury pinching his small mouth. Then this was Webb Dolan, another of Macklin's hired gunmen.

Dolan began harshly, "Boss, this damn' skirt—"

The girl turned, swinging a hand that left the white imprint of her fingers across the gunman's mouth. Dolan cursed, low and savage, but made no move.

Laredo Smith murmured, "That gal's all right!" and turned so that he faced Webb Dolan full on. He stood there like that, just watching the gunman.

The girl's bitter anger was a whip that flayed Macklin.

"You think you're pretty big, don't you, Chance Macklin? You think now that my mother is dead you can pull the strings and make my father jump any way you decide. I came here to tell you one thing, and you'd better pin it inside your hat where it'll stay. Bucksaw Basin has always belonged to the Winters. The only way you'll ever get us out is to hire more killers with your dirty dollars and shoot us off!"

Macklin's face darkened, and he rose half out of his chair. He yelled, "Dolan, get her out of here!"

The gunman grinned malevolently. "Boss, I sure will!"

He reached for the girl, but he never touched her. Rink stepped in, and said, "Don't do it, bucko!" He put his hand on Dolan's shoulder and shoved the man abruptly back.

The gunman sheered around to face this new danger with the smooth speed of a huge cat. His hot eyes swept Rink's long frame, searching for a gun and seeing none. His stare whipped back to Rink's face, cruel with mockery.

"Well, well!" he breathed.

Chance Macklin shouted, "Bantner, you've used up your welcome. Dolan, throw them out, too!"

Staring at the gunman, Rink murmured, "That's a big order, mister."

There was a deadly promise in Webb Dolan's dark eyes. He had Macklin's orders, and that was all he needed.

"Not too big an order, fellow," he drawled. And then his hand slashed for his gun.

What Rink Bantner did was as brutal as it was efficient. He moved in close in a single long stride, and his left hand caught Dolan's up-swinging weapon. He pushed the gun down and held it down, and drove his right into the man's middle. He took a short step forward, clubbed his right again. He threw his third blow to the shelf of Dolan's jaw, and the gunman didn't know when he hit the floor.

VIOLENCE from another part of the room was threatening to break loose, and from the corner of his eye Rink saw it. Chance Macklin jerked open a desk drawer, drove his hand toward the gun inside.

"Just try that," Laredo Smith invited. Soft as the old puncher's voice was through that electric silence, it was more potent than a shout. It froze Macklin's hand before he ever touched his weapon.

Laredo's drawl was dry and almost cheerful. "I ain't at all like Rink," he said conversationally. But an unmistakable gleam of menace was in his watery eyes. "Now me, I feel plumb naked less'n I got on my gun. You want me to show it to you, Macklin, you just keep your hand inside that desk!"

Macklin brought his hand into view, empty. His eyes were black chips of hatred.

"You boys play rough."

"You'll never know how rough," Laredo murmured. Then he said to Myra Winters, "Lady, if you got any more scripture to read to this polecat, you go right ahead. The stink is gettin' too strong for Rink and me to stand much longer."

She faced Chance Macklin squarely, defiant and contemptuous of the black fury storming in his eyes. Here was a girl, Rink thought, who might be defeated but who would never stop fighting.

Her words were stinging in composed mockery, and the way she used her words she could have cut the oilman no deeper if she had used a whip.

"For the last year you've been pressuring us to sell Bucksaw Basin. You used every underhanded trick in the book, and it was the worry you caused that killed my mother. It gives me a lot of pleasure to let you know that you gave me an idea that hadn't occurred to me before. You can thank yourself for giving us a new grip on the Basin."

She turned her back to Macklin, facing Rink squarely. "I heard you and Macklin talking while I was trying to get past Webb Dolan. You're looking for winter graze, and I've got twenty-five hundred acres I can't use. If you've got cash, I'll lease it for a dime an acre."

Rink smiled tightly. "Miss Winters, you've made yourself a deal."

Chance Macklin leaned forward, both his hands planted wide on the top of his desk. He made no effort to disguise the threat that was in his dark eyes. His voice was flat with cold menace.

"Bantner, I only warn a man once. You take over Bucksaw Basin, and you'll be leasing more trouble than you can handle."

Rink looked at the oilman steadily. "Now I'll tell you something," he said softly. "Anything I bite off, I'm ready to chew. You remember that, Macklin."

CHAPTER TWO

Brains Before Bullets

JEFF WINTERS was a gaunt, rawboned man who had grown grizzled and stooped with his adding years. He had the stubborn jaw and the hooded, level gaze of a fighter, but his guns had been shackled by age and responsibility to his wife and children. He gave his daughter a severe look of disapproval.

"You shouldn't have done it, Myra. You're just like your mother was, all fight and little judgment. All you did was rile up Macklin more."

"At least I set him straight on where we stand!" the girl insisted.

Rink Bantner chuckled softly. "She did that all right, Mr. Winters. I never heard a better job of readin' the riot act to a man."

The bright eyes of Myra's brother were both excited and anxious. "It's just what she should have done, Pa. If you ask me, Sis gave Macklin what he had comin'."

"Nobody's asking you, son. You keep out of this."

"I'm twelve years old, ain't I?" Packy demanded in a challenging voice. "I got a right to speak up in this family."

"We've got to fight him sometime!" Myra said angrily. "Twenty years ago you wouldn't have taken half of what Chance Macklin has thrown at you. You'd have got your gun—"

"Times change things," Winters overruled. "We'll settle this when we get home, Myra." He shifted his gray glance to Rink. "You say you want to lease the Basin grass?"

"If you'll let me have it."

Jeff Winters wouldn't allow hope to rise too far in his eyes. "You might as well know how things stand, Bantner. Chance Macklin is out to get the Basin. If you buy in, it'll just mean borrowing trouble, and

Macklin can throw a dozen guns at you if he wants to."

IT was old Laredo Smith who gave Rink's answer dryly. "I reckon I'm maybe ten years older than you, Winters, and I'll be right glad to oblige any dogs Macklin turns loose."

A flush faintly ruddied Winters' face. "You're old enough to have better sense," he snapped gruffly. "All right, Bantner, the grass is yours for a dime an acre, cash. But understand this, I'm not turnin' loose of the oil rights."

"My cows eat grass, not oil," Rink answered.

They had Orville Cady, a lawyer, draw up the lease. They signed it, and Rink handed over the money .

"Me and Laredo will take the train back to where my brother and another puncher are holdin' the herd. We ought to be able to drive into the Basin inside of two weeks."

They pushed the cattle hard, and reached Bucksaw Basin on the twelfth day. Dusty Tyles, red-faced and bowlegged, was loud in his approval of the range Rink had leased.

"It's a cow's heaven, that's what this is! It's low enough for the winds to miss durin' the winter, and there's more grass than we'll ever need, an' plenty of water in that crick."

Rink moved in on his younger brother who rode point. Phil Bantner had all Rink's height, but his lank frame had not yet filled out. His features were lean and fine-carved, and a trace of nerved-up restlessness was always in his eyes. He had never been able to take long confinement or hard work without fretting. He hipped around in his saddle, and looked at Rink.

"How far to the nearest town?"

Rink motioned his head vaguely to the southeast. "About fifteen miles. Town of Jawbone, but there's nothing much there."

Phil laughed with a faint trace of wilful derision. "That's somethin' I'll have to see for myself."

Wild crowds had always been a magnet for Phil Bantner, and that was Rink's greatest worry. Yet he had learned better than to keep too tight a rein on the boy. Phil was like a high-strung horse that had to be handled carefully. He would balk and pitch if held in too tightly.

"Sure," Rink agreed easily. "We'll ride into Jawbone in a week or so."

"I figure I'll amble over that way tomorrow."

Rink held back his irritation. He reminded quietly, "We've got to get the cattle settled down, and there are details to work out with the Winters. A lot of work to be done here, Phil."

"It'll wait till I get back from Jawbone," Phil grinned.

DURING the two weeks that followed, Rink learned more about the trouble that had been riding the Winters for the past year. Chance Macklin had used every possible trick and pressure-point to drive them out of the Basin. He was a big man with a wide and ruthless influence, and he had used it to get the railroad to raise its shipping rates on cattle. He had thrown his weight against local merchants, forcing them to clamp down on the Winters' credit. And credit was the backlog of cowmen like Jeff Winters.

That night while they sat on the gallery of the ranch house, Jeff Winters spoke in a slow, bitter monotone.

"Ma never was strong, and when Macklin started clampin' down she worried herself sick. I had to start sellin' off my cattle to get money we needed for her, and I never got a decent price. Macklin seen to that. But Ma was with me when I settled here, and she always loved the Basin. She wouldn't let me sell. She kept gettin' worse

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and worse until. . . ." Winters was silent a moment. "Just before she died, she made me promise never to sell the Basin."

Shadow Creek ran cool and deep through the cottonwoods in front of the house; and looking to the north Rink could see moonlighted range stretching out to the walls of the Basin, printed high and dark against the sky.

Rink kept his eyes on the distant skyline. "You aim to keep your promise?"

Myra Winters said fiercely, "We'll never sell this land!"

Jeff Winters said, "Before Macklin is through with me, he'll get the Basin for the price of the taxes I can't pay. And I can't do nothin' to stop him."

"You could get your gun and throw the fear of God into him!" Myra broke out. "You could fight!"

Winters ignored his daughter's bitter outburst. He said to Rink, "If I went after Macklin with a gun, one of his killers could drop me without ever bein' touched by the law. Macklin keeps inside the law, and I've got to do the same or else play right into his hands. I even figured once I'd sell off what cattle I've got left just to get a stake to fight him with—but he's got every market within three hundred miles all sewed up."

Rink rolled himself a smoke, and match-flame briefly ruddied the flat planes of his face. His eyes were hooded and thoughtful.

"If you had sold your cattle," he said, "how could you use the money from them to fight Macklin?"

For the first time since Rink had met the man, Jeff Winters showed some of his old fighting spirit. His voice cut bluntly and decisively through the darkness.

"If I could have sold my three hundred head for just ten dollars—and they're worth at least twelve a head—I'd have had three thousand to use against Macklin. I'd have used every cent of it to buy equipment and hire men. I'd sink me an oil well here in the Basin, and it would take all the killers on Macklin's payroll to stop me."

Moonlight glistened on moisture that came suddenly into Myra Winters' eyes. Young Packy sang out his boyish approval.

"That's talkin', Pop! We'd shoot their britches off if they ever came in here!"

For days Rink Bantner had been considering this possibility, and when he spoke to the rancher, it was with no hesitation.

"I'll take those cattle off your hands, Winters."

Silence that was charged with unexpected hope fell across the gallery. Then Myra said, low and warm with excitement, "Dad, did you hear that?"

"I don't have the cash," Rink went on evenly, "but I reckon the Jawbone bank will loan me enough on my herd. Are you willing to sell out to me?"

JEFF WINTERS' hands were clenched tight across his knees. "Sure, Rink, I'm more than willing, but—" He drew in a long breath. Then, harshly, "I can't let you do it, boy! You'll have your herd tied up with a mortgage, and with Macklin gunning for you it's too big a risk to take. Thanks anyhow, Rink."

Rink made an impatient gesture with his hand. "Don't thank me for anything, and I'll do my own worryin' about the risk. Don't get the idea I'm out to help you. Winters. I'm rowing my own boat, and don't you forget it. All I'll pay you is ten dollars a head for your cattle, and the only reason I'm buying is to make a profit. I'll see the bank in the morning about the loan."

At his camp some distance from the Winters ranch house, Rink found old Laredo Smith swinging stiffly out of saddle.

"I been out lookin' things over," Laredo announced. "The herd took to this range like kittens to milk. Dusty's ridin' first watch, and Phil will take over at midnight." He said as an afterthought, "The way Phil is actin', he's about due for another trip to town."

Rink said nothing. He had hoped a change of pasture would straighten his brother out, but now that hope was vanishing. The old puncher's watery eyes searched him insistently, and Rink knew he had to say something.

"I reckon everyone has a few wild oats to get out of his system."

"Yeah," Laredo said. But that boy's ridin' high, Rink, and he won't be stopped. One of these days he's going to get burned, and then it may be too late for him to level off."

Rink turned away. "I'll have a talk with Phil in the morning." He began shaking out his blanket roll. "I'm ridin' into Jawbone tomorrow to get a loan from the bank.

I'm buyin' Jeff Winters' cattle. He's goin' to use the money to drill an oil well of his own here in the Basin."

"The devil!" Laredo grunted. "You're mortgagin' your herd just to help him get up on his hind legs and swing back at Macklin— All that jest for old Jeff Winters?"

Rink twisted around on his heels, to stare at the grinning old puncher. "Don't be a danged fool, Laredo. This is business, and nothin' else."

But he couldn't dampen Laredo Smith's mirth. "You ain't thinkin' of Winters' daughter at all, are you? Not at-all!" The old puncher limped to his blankets, chuckling to himself.

FRANK MEDDING was a short man who had grown heavy and soft in his bank at Jawbone. He greeted Rink with a friendly smile, and listened to Rink's request for a loan of three thousand dollars.

"I don't see why the bank can't let you have the money, Mr. Bantner. You've proved the herd you drove into the Basin is clear, and it certainly should be sufficient collateral. Sufficient, indeed! I'll get the necessary papers ready for you to sign. You wait right here; I'll only be a few minutes."

"Go right ahead," Rink said.

The banker went out of his office, and left the building by the back door. It took him no more than a minute to reach Chance Macklin's office by following the alley behind the bank. He found Macklin in, and explained hurriedly.

"I've heard you had—er—plans in mind concerning Bucksaw Basin. I thought you might be interested in Bantner's request for a loan, Mr. Macklin."

"Interested, and grateful!" Macklin smiled expansively. "Tell you what to do, Mr. Medding. You give Bantner his loan, and I'll buy his note from you at twice your rate of interest. You say he wants it for six months? You cut him down to three, and I think I can throw a lot of big things your way in the future."

Frank Medding nodded his agreement. But he had a point to make clear, to let Macklin know the Jawbone bank was an institution that could be trusted.

"I wouldn't be doing this if I thought there was anything dishonest in it. But after all, a bank is in business to make money."

"Sure it is!" Macklin boomed. "You're doing the right thing, sir. No doubt of it."

"And I'm convinced the future of the community lies in oil, not cattle. This is best for the citizens."

"You'll never regret what you're doing, Mr. Medding," Macklin indorsed heartily. "I'll guarantee that personally!"

The banker left the room, and Webb Dolan entered through another door. The gunman's black eyes were ugly.

"So Bantner's in town!" he breathed. "This is our chance, boss. I'll go get Sid Nichols, and we'll lay for that monkey between here and the Basin. He'll never know what hit him."

Chance Macklin shook his big head. "Business before bullets, Webb," he said succinctly. "You remember that, and you'll be a rich man some day."

He took a cigar from his desk drawer, lit it, relishing its rich smoke. He looked at his gunman through the rising blue-gray fumes.

"I've got something more important for you to do, Dolan. You go tell Keno Rawls to keep his game open tonight. Rink Bantner's brother is coming in, and he likes his whisky and blackjack. You tell Keno he can go after blood tonight!"

MACKLIN turned to the window after Webb Dolan left, looking thoughtfully into the street's hard glare of sunlight. He was pleased with the way his plans were shaping up. By sundown he would hold a three-thousand-dollar mortgage on Rink Bantner's herd, and that would be a weapon in itself.

But even more potent was the sub-lease Macklin expected to have on the Basin before the night was over. He had maneuvered Phil Bantner carefully the last two weeks, playing up to the proud, arbitrary streak in the man. He had studied Phil, and knew what made him tick.

There was a wild, reckless streak in Phil Bantner, but to Macklin's shrewd judgment that was a defensive measure that stemmed from Phil's own weakness. Men looked up to Rink, and they always took Phil for granted. Phil was jealous of that, and of his older brother's steady judgment and cool ability to see a thing through. Rink's steadiness only served, in Phil's mind, to accent his own instability.

So Phil Bantner was ripe for Macklin's

shrewd flattery; he felt big in the oilman's presence, everything that his older brother was. But tonight Chance Macklin's plans called for a different strategy. Phil would drink heavily as he always did, but this night he would not win at Keno Rawls' blackjack table. Phil would keep on losing until he was deep in the oilman's debt, and Macklin already knew how he would bring the night to a close.

"Why worry about the money you owe me, Phil?" he would say. "You're Rink's partner, and he's got the wrong slant on things around here. You're in a position to set him straight, and at the same time net a nice profit for both of you. You've got a legal right to sell me a sub-lease on Bucksaw Basin. Do that, and we'll forget this poker debt, and on top of that I'll give you three per cent of the Basin's oil profits. You've got my word on that."

It would be as easy as pouring milk out of a bucket . . . and tomorrow Macklin would move his oil-drilling crew into the Basin.

Then another thought rose to the surface of Macklin's mind. What did Jeff Winters want with the three thousand he would get from Rink Bantner? To sink an oil well, of course! It was the only answer, Winters' only hope to hold the Basin.

"I'll make Phil promise to keep quiet about the sub-lease, and I'll lay low," he grinned to himself. "In three months, when I crack down, Winters will have spent his three thousand dollars sinking a well for me to take over. Sure, that's the thing to do! Brains before bullets!"

CHAPTER THREE

Black Gold Means Death!

THE next ten weeks built up a growing feeling of apprehension in Rink Bantner. Summer died, and the chill of autumn set in, burning color into the leaves of the trees in Bucksaw Basin. Still there had been no sign of trouble from Chance Macklin.

It worried Rink, nagged him.

"I reckon he knows he's licked!" old Jeff Winters said exultantly.

But there was no room in Rink's mind for that thought. He knew Chance Macklin's breed. They didn't give up so easily when big stakes were on the table. They laid their plans, and when the time came they struck swiftly and ruthlessly. When Macklin made his move, he would put everything he had into a single savage, crippling blow.

The cattle required but little attention on the Basin's lush range. Rink's brother, Phil, had grown even less dependable than ever, making frequent and prolonged rides in to town, always flushed with drink when he returned.

Old Jeff Winters picked the lowest spot in the Basin to sink his well. He hired men to cut and drag timbers out of the hills, and a tall derrick cast its foreign shadow across the range by the end of the first week after Rink got his loan from the bank.

Waiting for the second-hand drilling equipment he had bought to be freighted in, Winters set his men to work spudding out for the well. A week before Rink's note fell due at the Jawbone bank, the drilling had reached the thousand-foot level, and excitement was beginning to brighten the old cowman's eyes.

He caught Rink's arm, and pulled him over to the latest sample his foreman had taken. "Take a sniff of that dirt, Rink; taste it! It's oil, man! Another few days drillin', and this well will blow in!"

"*If* you get another few days drillin'!" Rink said darkly.

"So you're tryin' to make it scary again!" Winters hooted. "I tell you, Rink, we've got Macklin over a barrel and he knows it! But if it'll make you feel any easier, I'll double the night guard."

FOR a while Rink watched the activity of the oil crew around the derrick. The busy popping of the donkey engine made a rhythmic sound through the crisp morning air. It was hard for Rink to believe, cowman that he was, that a thousand feet below his boots a drill was biting ever closer to a fortune in black gold trapped in the bowels of the earth.

Laredo Smith, who was never far from Rink, grunted his disapproval. "Oil may be money, but I'll take my dinero on the hoof any day."

Jeff Winters voiced a question that for days had been nagging a corner of his mind. "Rink, what are you goin' to do about that bank note?"

Rink brought his glance around to the cowman. "I'm ridin' in today to get an extension until the spring cow market opens." He studied the cowman narrowly. "Anything worrying you?" he asked quietly.

Jeff Winters hesitated, uncomfortable. Finally he blurted, "Dang it, no—I reckon not! Frank Medding has always been square as day. Just the same, I wish you had that damn' extension over and done with!"

In spite of orders to the contrary, Laredo Smith refused to be left behind when Rink rode into Jawbone. And the old man wouldn't rest until he argued Rink into getting the gun out of his warbag and buckling it on.

"I'd sooner go without my pants than a gun as long as Macklin's crowd is in town," the oldster growled.

Laredo waited outside while Rink went into Frank Medding's office. The banker was as genial as he had been the last time they met.

"Come in and take a chair, Mr. Bantner! Have a cigar? And tell me how old Jeff's well is coming along."

"It's getting pretty close." Was there something false in the banker's friendliness, strain, or leashed fear? "I came to take you up on your promise to extend my note," Rink said quietly.

Medding waved his hand deprecatingly. "What's the rush?" he laughed. "You've still got a week to go. Anyhow, the note you signed was just a formality."

Rink held his tone level. "Just the same, I'd like to get the extension papers fixed up, if you don't mind."

Was that anxiety in the banker's smile?

"We can do that any time, Mr. Bantner. Any time at all! Relax and have a little visit—"

"I'd like to take care of it now," Rink said, softly stubborn. "There's no reason why we can't do it now, is there? You still hold my note, don't you?"

Something—it was fear, plain and real—jumped into the banker's eyes.

"So that's it!" Rink said. It took everything he had to hold down his anger. "You sold my note!"

MEDDING'S face reddened, then white pushed through to bracket his mouth. "It's nothing to be alarmed about, Mr. Bantner, nothing at all. In the banking business. . . ."

"Who to?" Rink's tone was dangerously quiet.

"What I want you to understand is that in my business. . . ."

"Damn you, I asked who you sold that note to!" Rink suddenly yelled. "Who was it, Medding? Chance Macklin? Was it Macklin?"

Rink needed no word for his answer. It was in the banker's face, clear and stark and frightened. It was in Medding's blustering attempt to avoid the raw fury in Rink's eyes.

"Don't you try anything, Bantner. I was within my rights, and if you so much as touch me I'll have the law on you!"

A single long stride took Rink close to the banker. Medding tried to back away, but Rink's arm reached out, and he caught the front of the man's coat. He jerked the banker in close, saw panic flare in the man's eyes. Medding screamed for help.

"Damn you," Rink grated harshly, "I ought to gut-shoot you, Medding!"

He cuffed the banker savagely across the mouth, and Medding fell whimpering to the floor. The office door opened, and two startled tellers came into the room. They saw Medding on the floor, and they saw the wrath in the cowman's eyes.

"Get the hell out of my way," Rink rasped. Neither of the men tried to stop him.

Outside, he stalked into the street, and Laredo Smith had to run to catch up with him.

"Rink, what's up? You look mad enough to—boy, if this is trouble, slow up and get your head!"

"I know what I'm doing. I'm going after Macklin. He bought my note from Medding. You stay out of this, Laredo!"

The oldster caught Rink's arm, but his grip was torn loose. He said savagely, "If you go up against Macklin, you'll be cut to pieces! You won't have a single chance, Rink!"

Rink turned stormy eyes on the oldster. "Didn't you hear me tell you to stay out of this?"

"Shore I heard you!" Laredo Smith snapped harshly. "But I stopped workin' for you five minutes ago. Where I'm goin' is my own business!"

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BUT it was just as the old cowman had said. They were whip-sawed the instant they went through the door of Chance Macklin's office. Webb Dolan came in behind them with his hand on his gun, and that alone showed Rink how long ago the trap had been planned.

Sid Nichols stood in the corner of the office, ready and waiting. "I'll be hanged if we ain't got company, boss!"

And there were three other men, killers by every sign of the trade, stationed around the room. Rink crossed them with a single acid swing of his glance. He looked contemptuously at the oilman seated behind the desk.

"I just came from Frank Medding's office. I didn't come here to beg you for an extension, Macklin. I know better than that. I came here to kill you. One way or another, I aim to do that."

The oilman's smile froze. Protected as he was by five trained gunmen, there was still something in Rink's threat that chilled Macklin's blood.

"Why don't you try it!" Sid Nichols whispered. "My cutter's half out. Let's see you beat it."

But Rink's fury was too blind to take in anyone but Chance Macklin. "Why not make it just you and me, polecat? I'll even give you first shot. Or are you too yellow for such odds?"

Macklin forced a laugh. "That would be wasting the money I pay these men for doing my fighting. I'm not a fool!"

"You're yellow, Macklin!"

The oilman flushed darkly, and his glance shifted to each of his men. Sid Nichols had his weapon half clear of leather. Gus Hinton gripped a shotgun that was already at full cock. Macklin saw those things, and knew the odds were all in his favor. That was how he wanted it. All he needed now was to bait Bantner into starting the fight. There were enough townsmen, drawn by the commotion and peering through the windows, to clear Macklin's men of any blame.

Macklin's smile was shrewd and confident. "You've been all wrong about me, Bantner. I hold nothing against you. I thought I was helping you out when I bought the sub-lease from your brother on the oil in Bucksaw Basin."

It was like a blow striking Rink Bantner, jolting him to the core. "Are you tellin' me Phil sold you a sub-lease?"

Macklin nodded, his eyes gleaming with a mockery only Rink could see.

"Didn't you know about it? Phil lost more money than he had, playin' poker. I knew you were too short to see him through, and he squared his debt by giving me the sub-lease. He's your partner, and he had a legal right to—"

Rink flared, "Phil hasn't got a cent in my herd. No one with any sense could call him my partner. You bought air, Macklin!"

The oilman murmured with thinly-veiled derision, "I suppose we'll have to let a court settle that."

"That's how you'd like it to be," Rink cursed. "You'll foreclose on that mortgage note of mine. Then you'll drag this sub-lease business into court, and you know Jeff Winters can't win because he hasn't got the money behind him. That's how you want it, Macklin! *Only it won't be that way!*"

Rink's hand was tense, splayed out over his gun.

Laredo Smith croaked, "No, boy—don't do it!"

But words were no good with Rink Bantner, and the old puncher knew it. He lifted his hands wide from his guns, so every man peering through the office windows could see. And then he struck Rink along the side of the jaw with everything he had.

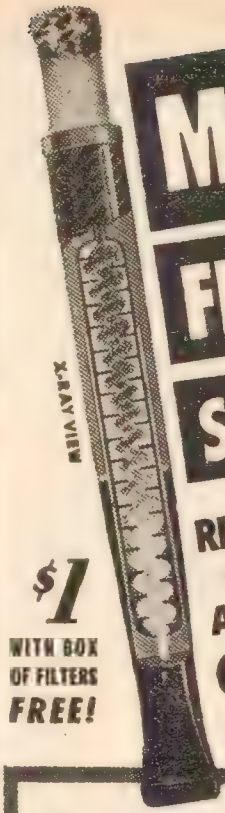
He caught Rink's sagging body, and let Chance Macklin have the full impact of his cold stare.

"This sort of busts up your party, don't it, polecat?" he growled. "Next time we'll make it a point to be more entertainin'."

RINK was too beaten to have anything to say to his brother. But Laredo Smith more than made up for Rink's silence. He cornered Phil at camp.

"You ought to be right proud of yourself! You let Rink do all the worry and work with the herd while you played big at Macklin's crooked poker table. You played big, all right! You played big enough to cost your brother every cent he's got!"

Phil flared defensively, "I didn't know about that note. Anyhow if Macklin won't extend it, it's Rink's own fault for getting rough."



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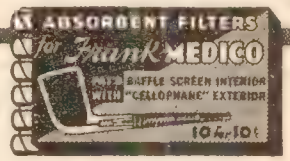

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"You always did find it easier to pass the buck than face the music," Laredo sneered. "Macklin played you for a sucker, kid. He couldn't have done a better job of thieving if he'd used a gun; and you helped him! All he wanted was the sub-lease that would give him the Basin oil."

"I don't give a hang about Jeff Winters' oil well! I'm in the cattle business."

"Sure," the old puncher said cuttingly, "everyone can rot but Phil Bantner! But you're wrong about bein' in the cattle business. You might have been once, but you ain't now. If for no other reason, Chance Macklin will foreclose on Rink's note just to make sure Jeff Winters is ruined. If Macklin had had his way in town, Rink would be dead now, and you could have thanked yourself for that, too."

Phil growled inarticulately, and slashed the back of his hand across the old puncher's mouth. Laredo stumbled back, and fell, and started to get up. Dusty Tyles moved toward Phil on his short, bandied legs.

"How about tryin' some of that on me, hero?" he said.

Phil's face was white with fury. He yelled, "You're fired, both of you!"

Tyles' drawl was raw with derision. "I never seen any of your money in our wages."

Phil spun on his brother. "Rink, I ain't takin' any more from these two."

FOR a long moment Rink said nothing. He looked at his brother and saw the weakness that was in the man, and in a way he blamed himself for that.

Rink said slowly to Laredo and Dusty Tyles, "We might as well go break the news to the Winters."

Phil Bantner watched the three men ride off. He felt suddenly completely alone in the world. The false heat of his anger died out, and he could no longer escape the nagging sense of guilt. He needed something to make him forget, to salve his injured vanity. What he needed was a drink—several drinks.

It was after sundown when he reached town, and he went directly to the Broken Spur. Chance Macklin was at the long bar when Phil pushed into the line and ordered his drink.

"You look like a cloud huntin' someplace

to rain," Macklin grinned. "What's the matter with you, Bantner?"

Phil tossed off his drink, ordered a second. "I just had a run-in with Rink."

Macklin's eyes narrowed. "Yeah? Anything serious?"

Phil stared broodingly at the amber liquid the barkeep poured into his glass. "I just busted up with Rink," he said harshly. "He's a damn' fool, Chance. Said you'd run one over on him when you bought that bank note. I tried to tell him you'd give him a square shake, but he's the big know-it-all. He wouldn't listen. So we split."

The oilman glanced briefly at Webb Dolan. "What you goin' to do now, Phil?"

"I'm goin' to get drunk as they come."

Macklin smiled. He waved to the bartender.

"Put anything he wants on my bill, Mike." It was his parting gesture to Phil Bantner. The cowboy was of no further use to him now. "I'll see you around, Phil."

Phil took his whisky without answering.

CHAPTER FOUR

Payment In Blood

IN THE saloon, Phil had run up a big bill on Chance Macklin, but he had consumed only a small fraction of the whisky he had been served. Most of the liquor was in the brass spittoon at his feet. But he was unsteady on his feet, his eyes dull and bleary.

"Mike—gimme some more of that snake-juice you call whisky. You heard what my ol' pal Chance said. Anythin' I want, an' it goes on his bill."

Contempt glittered in the barkeep's eyes. "Why don't you turn in, Bantner? You've had enough to drink for one night."

Phil considered that owlishly, gripping the bar with both hands. Then he scowled heavily. "What're you tryin' to do, Mike, get me drunk? I tol' you I had enough, and little ol' Phil always knows when he's had enough. T'hell with you, Mike!"

Lamplight yellowed Chance Macklin's office windows, and Phil stumbled drunkenly in that direction. But his mind was crystal clear; it was bitter and hating and gripped by a stubborn singleness of purpose that he had never before experienced in his unstable past. It gave him a strange feeling of

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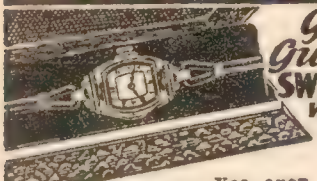

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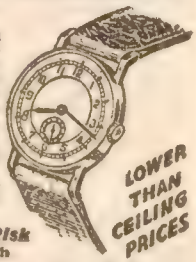

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having suddenly found something solid to put his feet on—a job to do.

He made his way unsteadily along the plank walk, but there was a driven purpose in the focus of his eyes on Macklin's office. He went through the door, leaned back on it heavily, closing it behind him. He bleared uncertainly at the oilman.

"H'lo Chance, ol' pal." No one else was in the room, and that was all Phil wanted to know.

Macklin looked up angrily. "Get out of here, Bantner," he ordered impatiently. "I've got work to do. You're drunk!"

Phil pulled his gun then, and there was no longer anything uncertain in his gaze.

"That's the first mistake I've seen you make, Macklin," he said coldly. "I ain't drunk. And I ain't here to waste time. I want them papers out of your safe—the sublease and the mortgage on Rink's herd."

MACKLIN half rose out of his chair. Alarm widened his eyes, then changed to dark fury. He yelled, "Bantner, you can't get away with this!"

"I think I can," Phil said softly.

The threat of Bantner's gun forced the oilman to his safe. Phil moved forward, coldly watchful.

The tumblers dropped, and the oilman pulled the safe open. He reached inside, brought out two folded papers. Then he turned, smiling ingratiatingly. "Don't be a fool, Phil. Your brother never gave you a man's chance. Stick with me, and I'll put you in a spot that'll mean plenty of money."

"I'll take them papers, Macklin," Phil said coldly. "Just lay them on the desk. I don't want to have to stoop."

He opened the papers, examined them with a quick drop of his eyes. He looked up at the oilman derisively.

"This sort of pulls your fangs, don't it, sidewinder?" he drawled.

Macklin suddenly yelled, "Do it, Hinton!"

Behind Phil a gun roared. The bullet struck him between the shoulders, and his back arched under the shock. But he didn't fall. Somehow he kept his feet, turned in a slow wheeling movement, and put his bullet into Gus Hinton's chest. He came back around, unsteady, but driven by a grim will to finish the job he had started.

He said thickly, "Stay off, Macklin—damn you, stay away from that gun!"

He rolled up the two papers in his left hand. One distant corner of his senses registered the startled shouts and running boots on the street outside. He pushed the papers into the glass stack of the lamp on Macklin's desk. He wouldn't let himself fall until he had seen them transformed to useless black ash. . . .

RINK BANTNER rode into Jawbone within minutes after the shooting. Laredo Smith came up in Rink's dust, followed by Jeff Winters and Dusty Tyles. They pulled rein near the crowd that milled in front of the oilman's office.

Rink caught the arm of the nearest townsman. "What's happened here?"

The townsman's voice was tight with excitement. "There was a shooting in Macklin's office a few minutes ago. A gent by the name of— Hell, you're Rink Bantner, ain't you?"

"I am. Keep talkin'."

"It was the dirtiest job I ever seen pulled," he said harshly. "It was your brother I seen goin' into Macklin's office, and at first I thought he was drunk. But he wasn't. He was as cold as ice, he was. He pulled his gun on Macklin, and made Macklin open his safe and hand over a couple papers. Then this Gus Hinton snake slipped in behind your brother, and he had his gun out. I didn't figure for a minute there'd be a killin', or I'd of yelled. But Macklin told Hinton to shoot, and he put a slug in your brother's back. But they never kept Phil from burnin' them papers, whatever they was!"

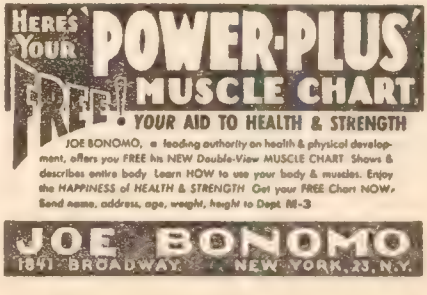
Rink threw a black, searching glance along the street. "Where's Hinton?"

"He's where he ought to be! Your brother drilled him before he went down."

A restless fury was in Rink's flat, clipped tone. "Is Phil dead?"

The oldster hesitated. Then he said, "I reckon. He got it right between the shoulders. He's still layin' there in Macklin's office. Macklin's whole crowd is in there, but when the sheriff gets here. . . ."

Rink started shoving his way through the crowd toward the oilman's office. Laredo Smith took one look at his boss's face, turned, and sang out a sharp order.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"Dusty—Winters—spread out and get movin'! We're goin' into that snake's nest!"

Rink angled into the street. Someone in Macklin's office killed the light. Webb Dolan's malignant shout drilled through the brief hush that fell.

"We're waitin' for you, Bantner! Come on in and get it!"

RINK halted in the darkness of the street. Now he knew how things stood, and how things would have to be.

Webb Dolan's taunt cut through the darkness again. "You hurry, Bantner, and you might get to your brother before he cashes in. He ain't dead yet."

That piled up a hot, unreasoning rage within Rink Bantner. He pulled his weapon, and he put two quick slugs into the lower corners of the office window. He heard a man's broken sob, the fall of a heavy body. Then the doorway and every window in the office erupted a flaming racket.

Rink used those muzzle-flashes for his targets, moving from side to side after each kick of recoil against his bent elbow. He advanced slowly, inexorably. When his gun clicked empty he broke into a crouching run toward the wall of the building. By some miracle, he made it.

He reloaded his weapon, listening to the harsh murmur of voices inside the office. Macklin's gunmen were cool and deadly, but the oilman was nerved-up and driven by his own mad rage.

"One of them's on the other side of the wall," Sid Nichols announced. "Bantner, I reckon. That's a tough jigger!"

"Stop talking and drill him!" Macklin's voice bit out viciously. "It's what I'm payin' you for."

"You want to try that?" Nichols invited acidly.

There was a moment of silence. Rink pressed his back flat against the office wall, watching both flanks narrowly. The brim of a hat inched slowly into view from the window to his left. So Rink was ready when the man suddenly thrust his head and shoulders from the window to his right. His shot crashed a split second before the killer's gun roared, and the man jackknifed forward to slide loosely through the open window.

Laredo Smith sent an anxious cry in from the street. "Rink, where are you? You all right?"

But Bantner didn't answer. He moved along the building's wall, cold and inexorable in his patience. He bent, and picked the dead man up bodily from the plank walk. He moved back toward the open door.

OUT on the street he could make out the vague shapes of Laredo Smith, old Jeff Winters and the others, closing in slowly on the building. And he heard Webb Dolan's whispery growl from the room behind him.

"Give them another five feet, and we can line on them easy!"

The thrust of Rink's arms sent the body of the dead man plunging through the open door. A man yelled, "Bantner's in!" and the room shook to the blast of guns.

The shots died as swiftly as they had flared, and Rink went through the doorway. A shot flamed almost in his face, and he clubbed that half-seen killer down with the muzzle of his gun. Then he put his back to the wall, hearing the slap of lead around him, calling each shot before he pulled his trigger.

Laredo Smith called through the open door. "Rink, where in hell are you?"

"Inside. I'm in here."

No bullet roared out in search of Rink's voice.

"I'll strike a light," he announced.

"You be careful, boy."

Rink held the match far to one side, scratched it into flame.

"Hellamighty!" Laredo growled. "Can't you wait till I get inside?"

But the match drew no bullets. Rink found the lamp on the desk, lighted it. Laredo Smith took a slow glance around the room.

"Dang it, Rink," he grumbled, "did you have to hog all the fun? You used up four of Macklin's dandies, and the rest must've skipped. . . . Phil's over here, boy!"

Rink was bending over his brother when the doctor came. Phil's face was ash-gray, and shock had dulled his eyes. A muscle in his cheek pulled and relaxed spasmodically.

"Rink?"

"I'm here, kid."

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"It hurts like hell, Rink."

The doctor made his examination with quick efficiency. He put a temporary bandage over the wound in Phil's back. He looked gravely at Rink.

"This boy a Texan?" he asked.

Rink nodded.

"Then get that scared look out of your eyes. Any other man would be dead by now, but a dawg-gone Texan always comes back for more."

LAREDO SMITH cornered Rink outside the building. "We rounded up some of that bunch, but Macklin ain't nowhere in town. He must've tucked his tail when the fight started."

Rink got his horse, and they left town at a hard run. Chance Macklin was a man whose life followed a single ruthless pattern. He would use any form of treachery to build up his power, to get what he wanted, and when his world crumbled in on him—he destroyed what he could not have.

The night air shook to the deep roar of the blast when Rink was still a full mile from the well in Buckshaw Basin.

"He must have used fifty quarts of nitro to blow up that well," Jeff Winters said bitterly.

But they rode on. They came to the wreckage of the derrick, and they found Chance Macklin's body pinned beneath one of the heavy timbers.

"He must have gone plumb loco," Laredo Smith grunted. "He never even tried to get away from the blast."

Old Jeff Winters moved on a few feet through the wreckage. There he stopped, bent, and came back grinning, exultantly, one big hand blackly wet.

"Too bad Macklin didn't live to know about this. That blast he set off—it brought in the well!"

Then Winters shifted his glance to the cowman. "I've got a lot of work to do here, Rink. We got to put up a pump and start barreling that oil. How's about you ridin' down to the house and tellin' Myra everything's going to be all right from now on?"

Rink turned toward the ranch house, its lights showing small and bright in the distance. He needed no second urging.

THE END

(Continued from page 75)

to smoke a couple of cigarettes. Rance pushed on faster than ever, confident now that Pete was taking his time, that he could overtake him that night.

But around dusk he pulled up short, eyes glued on the trail.

"Another rider," he muttered, studying the ground. "Rode out and blocked the trail." He swung out of the saddle and hunkered down. "Smoked a couple of cigarettes, then rode on up the trail together."

"Just stay put, and you won't get hurt," the quiet voice spoke from the bushes bordering the trail. The words were emphasized by the click of a rifle bolt. Rance cursed himself for paying too much attention to Pete's trail, and not enough to his own surroundings.

"Shuck the hardware," the man went on, then stepped into sight as Rance let his gunbelt fall to the ground.

"Looking for somebody?"

Rance could see nothing to be gained by lying. He jerked his head toward the trail he'd been following. "My brother. He's been shot."

"Yeah," the bowlegged gent said noncomitally. "Met 'im a while back. Way he talked, you was the hombre that plugged him."

Rance ignored that. "Where'd he go? I wanta see him."

"You will," the man said patiently. "He's up in the camp. Just walk in front of me, and don't try no tricks. Turn off the trail to the left up here at that big rock."

The big rock turned out to be half as big as a house. Rance turned off the trail and plunged into heavy brush. He pushed his way through the brush for fifty feet or so, then stepped into a clearing. He saw a narrow opening between two huge rocks. A camp fire's flame flickered on the rocks.

There were six men hunkered around the little fire. One of them was Pete. Rance started to speak to him, then clamped his lips shut at the look on Pete's face.

A big man wearing two guns got to his feet. His mouth was a small, cruel slit in his big face. His eyes were black, and they glittered in the dancing light from the fire.

"Another one to join our happy little band, eh?" He barked a short, raspy laugh.

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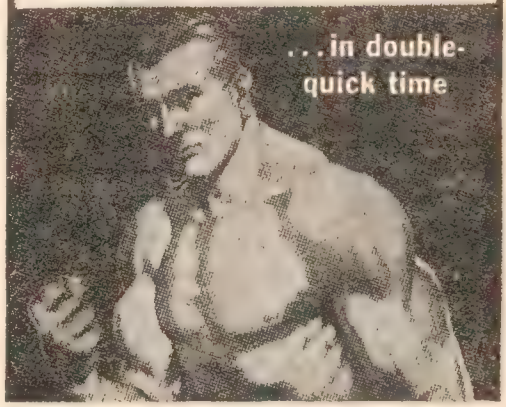

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"And what might your name be?" Rance asked the big man.

"Meg Tilly, if it's any of your damn' business!" the man growled back.

RANCE sucked his breath in sharply. He'd heard plenty about Meg Tilly and the outlaw band he ramrodded. A tough bunch—a killer bunch.

Tilly was regarding him suspiciously. "What're you snooping around here for?"

"The same reason Pete did," Rance said cautiously.

"Oho—you gunned somebody too, huh? And hitting the owlhoot with a posse on your trail." He stared first at Rance, then at Pete. "We'll check up on your yarns. If you're on the dodge like you say, we c'n use you. Otherwise—" he shrugged.

"We'll soon find out if either one of you is telling the truth. Ace Perdue and Slow Jim Akers are due back tonight. Reckon they'll know all about this shooting scrape you two been in."

"Yeah," Rance said through dry lips.

"You're damn right they will," a new voice spoke from the edge of the clearing. Rance froze. Slow Jim Akers!

"Shorty told me these two were in camp," Akers said to Tilly. "You gone crazy, Meg?"

"Rance!" Pete's yell cut the night like a knife. "Over this way!"

Rance shot to his feet. Pete was already disappearing out of the circle of light—scrambling back into the brush. Rance dived after him. A roar of shouts welled up from the outlaws around the campfire. A gun blasted, and Rance heard the slug snap twigs over his head. He stumbled into Pete in the dark.

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Other guns were joining in now, and the little clearing rocked under the concussion.

"Here!" Rance felt something cold and hard pressed into his hand.

"Start blasting!" Pete yelled, and a gun in his hand flamed orange streaks. Rance hefted the forty-five in his fist; saw the front sight blot out the figure of Slow Jim Akers, and pressed the trigger. Akers jerked in the middle, then sagged toward the ground. Rance thumbed two more shots at outlaws who were scurrying away from the fire, and saw one of them drop.

Then Pete was leading the way back through the brush. Rance stumbled along after him. A shout from the outlaws stopped them, and they whirled as the owlhooters charged them. The night was split wide open by the roar and hammer of guns. Rance fired at the orange flames that winked for a second in the night.

"C'mon," Pete called. "They keep their horses down here." They sprang to their feet and started running. A mighty blow struck Rance in the side. He stumbled and would have gone down, but Pete grabbed him. Ahead loomed the dark shapes of the outlaw's horses.

The world was spinning and reeling before Rance's eyes as Pete dragged him to a horse and shoved him up. As if in a nightmare, he could see Pete slamming lead at the charging outlaws, holding them at bay while he scattered the rest of their mounts. Then there was a comforting feel of Pete behind him, with an arm around him.

The horse crashed through the brush, and the sound of gunfire faded behind them.

"Pete," Rance mumbled. The world was spinning faster and faster before his eyes now; but he had to stay awake; had to stay awake till he talked to Pete. . . .

Pete's grip tightened around him as the horse hit the open trail and broke into a fast trot.

"Don't talk now," Pete said. "I done a lot of thinking sitting by that campfire. That's why I hid them guns out—was gonna make a break for it by myself—sure glad you came along to side me."

There was a grin on Rance's face as he passed out. That was all he wanted to hear—that Pete was glad for Rance to side him. . . .

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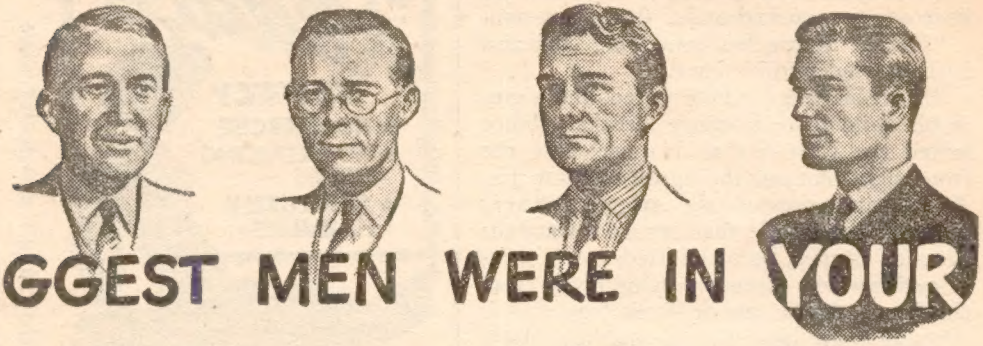

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